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*The MAKING
of A MAN **

E.H.
Lacon Watson

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THE MAKING OF A MAN

Mr. Sutton,
Mr. Brown, etc.

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

THE UNCONSCIOUS HUMORIST.
AN ATTIC IN BOHEMIA.
BENEDICTINE.
CHRISTOPHER DEANE.
HINTS TO YOUNG AUTHORS.
THE TEMPLARS.

THE
MAKING OF A MAN
A NOVEL

BY
E. H. LACON WATSON
AUTHOR OF "THE TEMPLARS," ETC., ETC.

LONDON
S. C. BROWN, LANGHAM & COMPANY, LTD.
47 GREAT RUSSELL STREET & 78 NEW BOND STREET
1904

CHAPTER I

IT was while Sugden was at Cambridge, where, by the way, he rowed five in the university boat for his two last years, being no light weight, that Sargent Henderson descended suddenly upon the village of Stourton, in Leicestershire, as *locum tenens* for the resident doctor, who had been peremptorily ordered to take a two months' holiday for the sake of his health. For Stourton—a name that you may have noticed on quite a respectable number of railway trucks in the Midlands and even farther afield—was a growing place, and had boasted a doctor of its own for more than ten years now, though never the same doctor for any great length of time. They did not last long, for some reason or other. The place was not unhealthy : the work, one would have imagined, not extraordinarily severe; and yet Dr. Barnard, now basking somewhere in the South of France, was the fourth occupant of the post, and would not, in all probability, hold it much longer. As for Sargent Henderson, he was merely a stop-gap, and did not count.

The Stourton doctor's business lay chiefly with the workers at the stone-quarries, which made the chief

industry of the place. The Stourton Granite Company made pretty constant calls upon him, and gave him enough work, of a rough-and-ready character, to keep his surgical hand in. For the quarries were prolific in accidents: hardly a week passed by without a damaged limb or worse, from falling stone or runaway truck or slippery foothold. Stourton was all scarred and seamed with quarries, dotted with mounds of rubbish, poisoned with flying clouds of dust and smoke, deafened by the grinding clatter of machinery. It was not, for its own sake, an ideal place to live in; and possibly this was one reason why its doctors were so ready to exchange into another practice. Other reasons might have been found in the fact that the quarrymen belonged to a club, and displayed a natural inclination to get something more than their money's worth out of their medical attendant; and also in the fact that the neighbourhood was not particularly rich in possible patients of the best class.

As a fact, there was not much society at Stourton or in its vicinity. At the Rectory lived old Mr. Sugden, father of our young friend at Cambridge, his wife and daughter. Old we call him, but merely to distinguish him from his son: as a fact, he was barely fifty years of age, at which happy time a man is surely at the prime of life. And Sugden, the father, was sufficiently energetic to belie the epithet. His parish was of a considerable size; in itself it gave work enough for a conscientious parson; but the present incumbent was not the man to rest content with the obvious. He took up anything that came to hand; he

accepted any unpaid work that was going in county or diocese. He was, in short, one of those invaluable men who do everything they can find to do, put into their work all the energy and skill at their command, and get uncommonly little in return. Chairman of the parish council (of course), on the district and county councils (highways and education committees among other trifles), on the board of guardians at Fleckney, the nearest market town—these were a few of the many positions he held bringing no profit and little honour. Of diocesan work he assumed, with equal cheerfulness, just whatever no one else cared to undertake; for which reason his name appeared annually on the title page of the Diocesan Kalendar, which he edited with more enthusiasm than that dreary compilation could be expected to inspire, and with such success (in the matter of securing advertisements) that the publication actually showed signs of emerging from the slough of bankruptcy in which it had struggled painfully since its inception. By way of relaxation he had recently taken upon his broad shoulders the work of reorganising the scheme of Diocesan Finance, and as a reward for his many and varied labours had been appointed Rural Dean by a grateful bishop, a sounding title which provided opportunity for the display of more energy, but did not add a farthing to his annual income.

With all this, the Rev. Frank Sugden, R.D. (to give him his full title), contrived to turn the most cheerful of countenances upon the world in general. His was a jovial face, adorned with a fine and healthy crop of hair, which seemed to grow the more freely on his cheeks and

chin in proportion as it retreated from his massive forehead. On either side of a finely domed head there still clung affectionately the curly remnants of a once goodly crop, but the summit of the skull was now bare and polished as a marble mantelpiece. He had a tremendous girth of chest. In fact, for all his energy, he was inclined to grow stout, a fact to which he would sometimes refer with a humorous mixture of pride and sorrow. Like his son, he had been an oar of no mean reputation in his younger days ; unlike him, he was the possessor of a magnificent bass voice. Once upon a time, when he was a curate, he had been invaluable at village concerts ; now he directed all his musical ability to the task of training the Stourton choir. He had put them into surplices, and taught them to sing. Mrs. Sugden played the organ, with her daughter as under-study. The music at Stourton had played no small part in the filling of the fine old parish church.

If Mrs. Sugden, that most excellent of youthful matrons, had a grievance against her much loved husband, it was in the matter of meals. For it was the hardest of matters to catch this knight-errant of the Church, and compel him to attend to so trifling a matter as food in the midst of his many and varied employments. At one o'clock—how often did it not happen !—the sound of the gong would be drowned by the resonant bang of the front door, and Evelyn or her mother, looking ruefully out of the dining-room window, would catch sight of the Rector, his soft felt hat crushed firmly on his brow, his coat-tails flying in the breeze, making off hastily on some forgotten errand in the parish. For to tell the

truth, he was not exactly a man of method, judged by ordinary rules, and the way in which he managed to get through his work remained a conundrum to his friends. Mother and daughter had ceased to wait for him now: it was agreed to be useless. Half an hour or an hour later, as the case might be, he would descend upon them, carolling a song, scattering behind him, perhaps, a train of derelict papers, for it was his amiable practice to stuff the morning's superfluous correspondence unread into his coat pockets, to be examined afterwards at leisure. Then, with a multitude of humorous comments upon affairs parochial and domestic, he would devour his food and be off again elsewhere. An amiable whirlwind, with the digestion of an ostrich.

By appearance, he should have been cellarer in a monastery of the olden time. But the good man drank but sparingly. As a set-off he talked a great deal, and with the oddest infusion of original and unclerical language. Out of the pulpit, he used a sort of slang of his own invention, that sounded pleasantly enough in his rich and jovial voice. Probably there was no better-loved head of a household in the kingdom. His wife and daughter considered him a prodigy of wit and learning and eloquence. Domestic appreciation may not invariably square with that of the rest of the world, but it is a good test of general worth. As a fact, the man was eloquent: his learning was at least equal to that of his neighbours; and if he was no wit he was at any rate something of a humorist—the more lovable character of the two.

The Sugdens represented the society of the parish in

which Sargent Henderson had taken up his temporary abode. In a new red-brick house on the Fleckney road, an incongruous sort of suburban villa planted there in the middle of the country, just on the outskirts of the parish, lived old Miss Fisher, sole surviving descendant of a well-nigh extinct race, the Fishers of Stourton, who had owned and farmed some three hundred acres of land in the parish for many generations in the past. The said land was now in the occupation of the all-devouring Granite Company, and brought in more money to the owner than it had ever done since the days of the great war, when farmers were a power in the land. Miss Fisher belonged to the past: so did her furniture and china—commodities that, unlike frail humanity, grow more valuable with age. Her society was limited. Occasionally she had the Rector's wife and daughter to tea; sometimes the doctor's—when the doctor happened to possess them. She held herself above the rest of the parish, except the manager of the quarries, who was granted brevet rank as a gentleman. Unfortunately, the manager happened to be a bachelor.

It was Miss Fisher, sitting prim and erect in her straight-backed chair, who first acquainted Mrs. Sugden with the name, and some of the personal characteristics, of the new doctor. She spoke querulously, as one with a chronic grievance against the times.

“A fine, tall, free-spoken young gentleman,” she complained, “so far as I've heard. But I never hear much nowadays—me being so poorly, and one thing and another. But I saw him walking up the road this morning, and he took off his hat quite pleasant and like

a gentleman." She sighed audibly, with the idea perhaps of intimating that these little acts of politeness did not often fall to her share. "He seemed very young," she continued pensively. "For my part I must say as I've no great faith in these young men. We never saw a young doctor in my poor father's time. He couldn't abide them. There was old Dr. Sharples used to attend on him, from Fleckney. White-haired he was when first I knew him, and that was nigh fifty years back." She relapsed into reminiscences.

Mrs. Sugden was glad Dr. Henderson had arrived. It was unsatisfactory being left without a resident doctor.

"Indeed it is," resumed the hostess, "especially if you're liable to be took sudden with these attacks of mine." She laid her hand on her heart and wheezed painfully. "I do assure you they are that bad sometimes I never get a wink of sleep all night. I was only asking my Sarah last night if she knew where this Mr. Henderson was lodging, in case I had to send her for him. She told me a lot of tales about him, picked up in the village, I suppose. She's a gossip, that girl, if ever there was one." Miss Fisher shook her head in solemn reproof. Ill-natured people asserted that she selected her servants with an eye to this particular failing.

"Why! isn't he living at Dr. Barnard's?"

The old lady smiled, a wintry smile. "They say he wouldn't stay in that house above an hour," she explained. "He used terrible language about it, so they say, and it seems he's one of those who talk very free when they're a bit put out. It comes of being one of them ship-doctors, I suppose. Yes! he was a ship-doctor, and he's

been all round the world, my Sarah says. They think a lot of him in the village. And he went straight out of that house—I don't like to tell you what he said about it—and made up a bed for himself on the surgery floor, so they say. Just a mattress and a blanket, that's all. And there he stays ! for all the world like a hermit.'

Mrs. Sugden went away, naturally enough, with the opinion that Dr. Henderson was something of a Bohemian. It was true. He had been accustomed to rough it ; he had also a sudden temper, and was apt to do, and say, the unexpected thing on occasion. In many ways he was a remarkable man. He had travelled widely ; he had seen the world ; he had self-confidence for a dozen, and he could talk—not only in the sense that Miss Fisher had indicated. His nature was masterful : the look of him was enough to tell you that.

Why he came to Stourton at all remains a mystery to this day. Perhaps it was a sudden wish for a period of quiet in a stormy life ; possibly it was just want of ready money. Henderson never had too much of that. But in all probability it was mere chance—that combination of fortuitous circumstance that plays so large a part in our lives. The man had a passion for life, for experience, for the acquisition of knowledge, and here was the chance of a three months' spell at something he had not tried before. Rustic England was unexplored country to him. It might be worth while to analyse its products ; to find out what manner of men were these who stayed in an obscure village when the great world lay open to them. Hence, let us suppose, the answering of that fateful advertisement.

And then he came down, one April evening, to take up his quarters, and found the doctor's house in a fine confusion—his wife and children had left that morning for a seaside lodging—and a slatternly servant opened the door to him. The Barnards were a careless and unthrifty household, and the look of things did not please Henderson, who could be fastidious on occasion, and had learned to stand up for his rights in many quarters of the globe. "The place stinks like a dead Chinaman," was what he said when shown upstairs to his room. He gave orders for the furniture to be turned out and the floor scrubbed next day. In the meantime the windows were to be open day and night. The woman showed signs of rebellion—for a moment. Before he had been a quarter of an hour in the house she would as soon have questioned his orders as the Pope's—and she was Irish and a Roman Catholic. There was this about Henderson, that he had the faculty of inspiring wholesome awe in most people.

"When the place is a little less like a pig-stye I may come back," he said finally. The villagers of Stourton, standing at the street corner or at their house-doors after the day's work was done, were not a little astonished to see a young man of athletic build marching unconcernedly through the village with a roll of bedding on his shoulder. The surgery, built by the Granite Company close to their own offices for the reception and treatment of their own wounded workmen, was the only place that appealed to this singular man. He spent the night there, and many succeeding nights. There was a room upstairs with an iron bedstead, meant for the reception of serious

cases. It was not until after a week of strenuous purification that the new doctor returned to occupy his room at the Barnards' house. His meals he took there daily, and the Irish servant worked beneath his eye as she had never worked before. At the end of that week the doctor's house was cleaner than it had ever been within the memory of man.

CHAPTER II

IT did not take long for the good people of Stourton and the neighbouring district to discover that they were entertaining an oddity, an eccentric, in fact a remarkable man, in the person of Sargent Henderson. Indeed, that gentleman himself took no pains to conceal the patent fact. He had small respect for the conventions ; he said on most occasions precisely what he thought, and was wont to couch his opinions in picturesque and forcible language. His was by no means the customary “ bedside manner.” It was he who made the famous remark to old Mrs. Venables, of Bilton (who was unwise enough to tell it to her friends as an example of Dr. Henderson’s uncultivated manners), when she called him in to prescribe for her many and various complaints. “ Why,” he said, “ the fact is that you eat too much and sleep too much and take too little exercise. You’re out of condition—that’s all.” This to a lady who had been flattered her life long by every physician she had called in. “ I told him,” Mrs. Venables used to say in telling the story, “ I told him he appeared to think I was a horse.” To this day she probably imagines that the young doctor was crushed by the repartee.

The ladies did not know what to make of Sargent Henderson. Yet some of them liked him none the worse for that—those who were not bound hand and foot with the fetters of convention. He was a fine figure of a man, and there was strength expressed in every line of his face. Tall and well-made, with a bronzed complexion, and blue eyes that looked very straight and piercingly at their object—the eyes of a sailor—from under slightly wrinkled brows, he was a man that few could pass by unnoticed at first sight. Few did, when he went his rounds in the Stourton neighbourhood. For consider : here was a district very sparsely populated with families of consequence. In a four-mile circle (which just excluded the market town of Fleckney) lay perhaps a dozen parishes, a dozen clergymen with or without families, but not more than one resident squire. Everybody knew everybody else ; a new arrival was an event ; and when that new arrival was a single man, reputed to be of eccentric habits, the event inspired curiosity.

It was a dull neighbourhood—a dull country society. Even pretty little Evelyn Sugden, just growing up into womanhood at the Rectory, felt at times that there might be more going on in other and more favoured localities. Not that she would have owned to a feeling of loneliness. Not in the least ; she would have resented such an imputation with the utmost heat. She had her father, in whose company it was surely impossible for any one to feel dull ; she had her mother, who was an angel ; and during the vacation she had Jack. There were not many girls in the county more fortunate. And yet—well, she had read novels, and she felt dimly that the

heroines of these pleasant tales lived more in the world than she did. A dance, for example, came to her perhaps once a year, at Christmas time, and by no means always then. The Cazenoves gave one annually, but last year old Colonel Cazenove, the rector's brother, had died, and the neighbourhood had to go without its one festive gathering. In the summer, it was true, there were garden parties, with tennis, and always with the same people playing. It certainly was a pleasure, even to Evelyn, to see a new face.

Evelyn Sugden was a good girl. She worked assiduously in the parish, helped to train the choir, played the organ in church when her mother was unable to do it herself, and did a hundred things the day through to help her parents in the never-ending tasks that fall to the lot of a country clergyman's family in a large and growing parish. These little duties of ministering to others were an intimate part of her nature. She had the motherly instinct—the instinct of succouring the weak. Indeed, all the Sugdens had their share of it : it was a characteristic trait of the race. There was not a tramp in the country who could not—and did not—impose upon her father. She had her aspirations, her ambitions ; sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another. Once it had been her dearest wish to go out as a missionary. That was long ago. More recently she had wished to go through a nurse's training in a London hospital. Growing into womanhood, she was just beginning to think it possible that some day she, too, might marry. If so, she would naturally become a clergyman's wife—only, was there another clergyman in the country like her father ? She

met clergymen everywhere, whenever she went to a party, or paid calls with her mother, and though she might respect the older ones, she had never yet seen one who would be possible in—that other light. She felt dimly that some of the younger ones seemed hardly worthy of their exalted office. There was, for example, the little fat curate of Fleckney, who had played croquet with her last summer. No doubt he was really good and earnest and sincere, but he looked mean, and as if he were too fond of eating. She remembered what a shock it had given her at first to find herself wondering whether it were possible for a clergyman to be not wholly a Christian.

She was growing into a woman ; she was beginning to think—to put forth the tiniest little tendrils of thought that curled up again tightly the moment they came into contact with hard fact. For she was absolutely ignorant of the world, absolutely ignorant of all evil—so innocent that she still imagined the world to be sundered into two groups, the good and the bad, and wondered vaguely why some were so foolish as to choose the path of the wicked when it was, after all, so easy and so happy to pursue the way of the righteous. For all these wanderers, for old Blake in the village, who got drunk regularly every Saturday night, for all wife-beaters, burglars, liars, and other offenders she offered up her simple prayers night and morning daily, not without a pitying surprise that such men should exist under the sway of a beneficent Creator. Yet she recognised that within herself dwelt also the seeds of possible evil. She prayed to be preserved from sin. Once, many years ago, she had stolen a fig ; and though the crime had long ago been confessed and

atoned for, it lay like a black stain upon her memory, and recurred to her every Sunday when she repeated the Litany. Possibly it is as well that a few young girls should still be brought up in this primal simplicity of thought. They afford a not unpleasing contrast to the many who know everything.

And yet, with all her white purity of mind—a blank tablet waiting to be inscribed with character—she was human, and feminine. She had noticed, at garden parties and elsewhere, that men looked at her ; she had scanned her own features in the looking-glass ; and she had realised, with a curious mingling of shame and secret gratification, that she was pretty. Was it, then, a sin to be pretty ? Hardly in itself, but it led to many grievous faults—to vanity, among other things, and vexation of spirit. Forthwith the little saint included in her orisons a petition against vanity (to which vexation of spirit joined itself unasked, prayer naturally couching itself in Biblical language), and for a day and a half abstained from glancing at the mirror, except when it was necessary to do her hair. Did not the Bible counsel mortification of the flesh ?

Now, being feminine, she was filled with a vague curiosity to see and hear the man of whom every one was talking. Here was a man of very different build from any she had been in the habit of seeing—an Othello who had travelled and met with strange adventures, who had seen the wonders of the great world and played a part in life. Rumour spoke of him on all sides, from Mrs. Saunders, wife of the village blacksmith ("Never seed such a gentleman, miss, not in all my born days") to old

Mrs. Cazenove, of Thursby ("Really one of the most interesting men, my dear. Such a flow of conversation I never heard"). She began, all unconsciously, to allow this Dr. Henderson to occupy her mind, to wonder what the tall, bronzed man with the blue eyes, who walked so rapidly about the village, had done, and what his so remarkable conversation would be like at close quarters. And then, one day, her father came in to luncheon an hour late, and announced cheerfully that he had asked the doctor to dine with them that evening.

"My love," said the jovial parson, "I have a treat for you to-night. Henderson is coming in to dinner. No notice—nothing in the house. Just like me, Evy, isn't it? There! go and kiss your mother and make it up." He laughed—a low, rich laugh that was good hearing. Evelyn sat on the arm of his chair while he ate, and Mrs. Sugden smiled placidly at them across the table.

"You will never get any older, dear," was all that most amiable of wives replied. How many would have thrown up their hands in horror, and rushed to the kitchen straightway with a biting comment on the thoughtlessness of mankind! "We were going to have beef-steak pie. I'll tell Mary to make some soup as well." She went on soberly with her knitting.

"Excellent! Cow-tart for the Doc., eh, Evy?" He pinched his daughter's arm playfully. It was true enough that Sugden had not yet lost the high spirits of youth.

Evelyn caressed the few short curls that still clung affectionately to her father's scalp.

“What is he like, father dear ?”

“Like ? The curiosity of women ! Mother, here’s little Evy growing into big Eve, and becoming curious. See, she blushes like the rose.” And, indeed, there was a faint tinge of rose-pink on her forehead. “Sure, an’ he’s a foine man, intoirely,” went on the incorrigible jester, who delighted in employing all known forms of dialect, and employed them all with equal inaccuracy. “ ‘Tis meself was taken wid him. We met, let me see now, it was just one o’clock, by the blacksmith’s shop. And see what the time is now ! We got talking. The man’s a wonder.”

“What were you talking about all that time, letting your lunch get cold ?”

“Is there no satisfying you ? Well, we talked of everything.” Sugden grew reflective. “If I could envy any man his life, which of course is impossible,” with a quizzical glance at wife and daughter, “it would be that man. Here am I, fifty years old, or thereabouts, with all the thatch off my roof, and nothing to show for it but two scapegrace children and a misguided parish. And there’s Henderson, six-and-twenty at the most, I should say, with a mind chock-full of memories of all sorts. The man’s been everywhere and done everything. Sheep-farming in Australia, out in that Cuban business, been through a revolution or two in South America, was in Kimberley during the siege. How he got it all in beats me, let alone getting qualified as a doctor. It put me into a fever to listen to him. Are we too old to go out, mother ? Let’s emigrate, and see the world.” He heaved a sigh and laughed at his own enthusiasm.

"Oh ! I am glad he is coming to dine, father. It will be nice."

"There now ! Evy is infected. I knew how it would be. Mother, you must keep an eye on her. He's a dangerous man, this Henderson." Mrs. Sugden shot a reproving glance at her husband, who assumed immediately an expression of mock contrition. "Evy, kiss me. Your poor old father is in disgrace. He must go to his study and lock himself up until it blows over." With which parting shot this most jovial of parsons stuffed a few letters which he had not yet contrived to read into his capacious pocket, and hurried out, humming "Father O'Flynn" as he went in his rich bass voice, to be seen no more until close upon six o'clock.

And Henderson came that night to dinner, and sat opposite Evelyn, and never once looked in her direction (or so the girl thought, but I imagine she was mistaken), and talked about things that she had never heard of before, in words that, to tell the truth, conveyed very little meaning to her ears. Perhaps she was just a little disappointed. There were no stories of wild adventure in distant lands—nothing about sea-life or Spanish atrocities in Cuba, or revolutions in South America. The stranger occupied most of his time in talking to her father about strange things called totems, which apparently grew in the wilds of Australia, and were connected, in some obscure way, with religion. Evelyn sat very quiet and demure, saying never a word except to her mother, and only stealing a look at her *vis-à-vis* on rare occasions. The bronzed face, blue eyes, and heavy moustache rather repelled her at first sight, and yet she could not rest until

she had looked at them again : they were so unlike anything to be seen in her own little world. And this was a man who had been all over the world ! Naturally he would not care to look at a girl just out of the nursery, who had never even been to London.

One or two sentences emerged out of the chaos of meaningless words and fixed themselves in her memory. He told one horrible story of an Australian aborigine who had performed a wonderful feat of surgery, cutting off his own leg or something of the sort and cauterising the stump by plunging it into a wood fire. "Very interesting to the physiological student," he remarked. Another phrase came suddenly out of the jumble of unfamiliar expressions. "I had to drop him first and treat him afterwards," he said, with a laugh. It was puzzling, but she gathered in a vague way that there had been fighting. There was something cruel, she thought, in the line of the jaw and in those steel-blue eyes.

Dr. Henderson did not seem to take much interest in women. He talked but little to his hostess, and only came into the drawing-room afterwards to say goodbye. Evelyn mentioned him casually in a letter to her brother the next day. "There is such a funny man," she wrote, "come to take old Dr. Barnard's place while he is away, he dined here last night and kept on talking about all sorts of things the whole time. Father says he is *most interesting*, but I could hardly understand a word he said, and he did not seem very polite to mother or me. He has travelled all over the world. I think he is horrid." Miss Sugden, you will perceive, was not as yet very careful in the selection of her adjectives, nor very good

at conveying an impression. Jack Sugden, then in training with the Cambridge crew, was too much occupied in his work to waste any thought on the *locum tenens* at Stourton. "Another of those nigger missionaries," he thought, being always a careless reader. The word "horrid" aroused no suspicion of latent danger in his breast. He was young and inexperienced in the ways of girls. In the best of health and spirits, he took up his quarters with the crew at Putney for the final stage of practice, utterly unconscious that one Sargent Henderson, with whom he might be much concerned in the future, was meeting his little sister almost daily, and beginning to occupy no small share of her thoughts. She never mentioned his name in any succeeding letter.

CHAPTER III

ON the next Sunday evening Dr. Henderson came in to supper, and on several succeeding Sundays. It began to be a recognised event in the week. Sugden, with his customary geniality, extended to him thus early a general invitation. "That cook of the Barnards," he explained to his wife, "is enough to kill an ostrich. We've sampled her ourselves, my dear, once or twice, and we ought to know. Now I like the doc." (by which abbreviated term he preferred to designate Henderson), "and we may as well see that he gets one square meal a week."

"Don't you think, dear, you make friends rather quickly?" Mrs. Sugden spoke with a smile, but she was conscious of not being quite such an ardent admirer of the new doctor as her husband. Something in the man grated upon her. Perhaps it was that air of self-confidence. But had she disliked him with all the force of her quiet nature, had he been a cannibal or a dangerous lunatic, she would have made no more forcible protest.

"Well, I do, and that's a fact," laughed the other.

"You see through me and out the other side. But I don't believe in being too careful. Better to make a mistake now and then than never to make a friend. When I see a man I like, or a woman either, my dear, I let 'em know it. And if that hadn't been my rule, where would you have been now? No! I don't believe in beating about the bush."

Mrs. Sugden laid her head upon her husband's broad shoulder in a manner very pretty to witness. Not much more than twenty years ago—how short a time it seemed—they two had met for the first time, and the impulsive clergyman had fallen in love at first sight. She had been staying with the Cazenoves, on a short visit—but somehow the visit was prolonged beyond the time originally intended. Sugden was a whole-hearted wooer. The two were married within six months of their first meeting.

"You were not always quite so fortunate." She smiled at him with a touch of innocent coquetry. "There was that poor Mr. Dunkley—do you remember?"

The rector rubbed his nose reflectively. "Well! I give you Dunkley," he said, with a laugh, half rueful, half amused recollection. "And yet I don't know that it was all wasted. It was experience for me, and it may have helped him, and anyway, my love, I don't go back on my principle. What are a few pounds to a great principle? And I may get the money back some day, too. Mind you, I don't wholly despair, even of Dunkley. The man had points in him. He had a fine tenor voice, too. Do you remember when we used to sing that

duet?" A few bars of melody reverberated through the little room.

"Do you ever get any money from those horrid things he made you buy?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Nary a cent," returned the optimist, with unabashed cheerfulness, "nor ever will, I expect. Bless the little woman, is it money she's afther. We have enough, plaze the pigs, as long as old Hirst pays the rint. But there! no more investments for me. Be aisy, me darlin', not if the docther prays for ut—an' it's little of that he does, the haythen."

He did not spend much of his time that way, it is true. And yet he began to appear in church on Sunday evenings, as a preliminary to the subsequent supper at the Rectory, whereat the ingenuous Sugden rejoiced exceedingly, for was not this part of his scheme? He had it in his mind, worthy man, to lead this young fellow into the right path. Here was a soul to be saved, and a soul well worth the saving. The man attracted him, and not only from his wide information and wider range of experience. He diagnosed the condition of his mind, not without some acuteness; for it was his profession to be a physician of the soul, as it was Henderson's to locate diseases of the body, and he was by no means deficient in perception. He saw that the young doctor's temperament was cold, critical, scientific; that he had no sense of the value of religion, save as an interesting psychological study; that he was deficient in reverence. Sugden was not one of those clergymen who shrink away from such a character, appalled at its amazing wickedness. His was a large humanity, conjoined with

a fervent faith. He might not be permitted to bring this man into the fold—that was in the hands of the Almighty—but at any rate it was obviously his duty to try. Here was the first step—to get him to come to church ; the next—and the next—was to pray for guidance.

Sugden, with all his energy and enthusiasm, that bubbled over now and again in extravagances of speech and little humorous peculiarities of action as well, was a true apostle of the faith. And he was no fool : he realised that argument never yet won a convert ; he saw clearly enough that controversial methods would avail him little in this matter. According to his views, religion was a condition of the mind rather than a question of balanced probabilities. Evidence in support of certain dogmas was useful, no doubt, as a buttress to support a doubting faith, but what is the use of your buttress when there is no faith to be supported ? These things had to come gradually and by degrees : the ground must be prepared before it is sown. And to different men the truth came in different ways : on some it might burst in sudden irradiating splendour, as on Saul travelling to Damascus ; in others it might wax steadily from childhood onwards, a plant of slow growth. Doubters there were, and scoffers ; but at what will not men scoff ? Time was, when he himself had laughed (*si parva licet componere magnis*) at the power of love—and lo ! he had fallen under its spell in a single hour.

The good man sat long in his study that afternoon thinking over his sermon for the following Sunday, while Sargent Henderson, on his part, was ransacking Dr.

Barnard's book-shelves to discover something that might appeal to his wide and catholic tastes. There was not much to find.

“What trash the fool reads!” was Henderson's amiable comment. He discovered an out-of-date treatise on physiology, and settled down to read with a sneer on his face. He began to wonder why he had taken this place at all; that any spot could be so deadly dull had never entered his imagination. As for the novelty, it had worn off in a fortnight; and as to the neighbourhood, he felt that he had probed already the mind of every living person within a four-mile radius. Which only shows how gravely even the cleverest of us may be mistaken, at times.

His thoughts ranged freely over the family at the Rectory, in not too complimentary a fashion, for Henderson was in a bad temper that afternoon. “With a parson,” he reflected cynically, “the first question is always the same—is he a knave or a fool? Well! I'll give old Sugden the benefit of the doubt. I believe he is sincere, *ergo* he is a fool. His position, of course, is a hopeless anomaly. I take it he is one of the few who believe what they preach—with reservations. No man could believe it all and retain his sanity. In order to arrive at this pitch of fatuity the man must have deliberately cut himself away from his reasoning self. Probably any power of ratiocination he may have possessed is by now atrophied. And yet I like the man, in a way—probably because I can see he likes me. He has a crude vein of humour and a healthy optimism. I could do with a touch of the latter myself, at times.”

He smiled as his thoughts turned to the lady of the house. It was plain to this keen observer that Mrs. Sugden instinctively disliked him. "And probably," he mused, "if she knew a little more about me she would like me a great deal less. We can't all be saints, fortunately, and I don't know that my worst enemy could accuse me of that particular vice. No! I've generally wanted a good many things, and some of 'em I've contrived to get, and the rest I've had to do without, and as to morals—I don't suppose I'm much worse than the average man who's been about a bit. What is morality, anyway? One thing here and another in Mexico—and nothing at all in a good many other places. The custom of the country, sanctioned by public opinion."

And since in England (or in this particular section of that favoured country) it appeared to be the custom to go to church, Henderson went there next Sunday, and took up his position, as became so important a parishioner, immediately behind the Rectory pew, where he had an excellent opportunity of studying the back of Evelyn Sugden's neck. Now the back of a girl's neck may or may not be the most beautiful thing about her, but if the girl have any pretensions to good looks at all, it is often singularly well worth studying. One discovers in it new and unimagined charms—perhaps because it is occasionally possible to subject it to a curious and minute examination (as, for example, during a half-hour's sermon) without arousing remark. Henderson found his new occupation quite engaging—so much so that I fear he never heard anything of that sermon at all.

He found himself wondering why he had never noticed the girl before. Now it struck him suddenly that she must be quite pretty—even more than pretty. The poise of the head on the neck, the little tendrils of hair clustering behind, the dainty little ears—he had full leisure to observe them all. For many Sundays to come they afforded him a novel and fascinating interest; during the subsequent supper he was moved several times to look boldly at the full face. Yes! undeniably she was a very pretty girl.

“The little saint!” he said to himself more than once, with a touch of pitying contempt. The girl piqued him in a way; she was so different from any other girl he had known. Never once did he catch her looking at him. He could only guess the colour of her eyes. He began to take pleasure in studying her, and not only her outward appearance. What were her thoughts? What was hidden beneath this pretty, prim, demure exterior?

“A girl of that age,” reflected the man of travel and observation, “has no character. She is waiting to be stamped. And yet she must think of something—she must have her fancies. Religion cannot occupy all her thoughts, however piously she may behave in church.” He decided that it might be amusing to talk to her and draw her out.

And Evelyn herself, of course, was not unconscious of his regard. Few women are so dense as not to perceive when they are being subjected to a critical examination. She felt instinctively even on that first Sunday evening that his eyes were upon her; it made her hot and

uncomfortable, and distracted her attention. Once or twice she put her hand up involuntarily to the back of her neck, in sudden dread that something might have happened—that her hair, for instance, might have become disarranged. She was certain that those eyes were fixed upon her ; they oppressed her almost with a real physical pain ; she could feel the gaze as though a wave of heat touched the skin. Evelyn never remembered an evening service that had seemed so long. Her thoughts seemed to be no longer under her own command ; they pursued ways of their own, wandering along quite unimaginable paths, begirt with precipices. She was angry, resentful, a little frightened, and yet somehow mingled with the resentment there was a spice of gratification. When she went up to her bedroom after church to take off her things she was conscious of a rapidly-beating heart. Her face was flushed, and her eyes shone back at her strangely in the looking-glass. She covered her face for a moment with her hands.

When she went downstairs for supper she was dressed with severe simplicity in plain white. Did she know that this particular frock suited her to admiration ? As to that point let others judge ; she intended her action as a sacrifice, a propitiation. She would wear no ornaments. This is what she said to herself alone in her room, but she looked at herself when the change was completed not without a gleam of satisfaction. The feminine nature is apt at self-deception. She came down shy, demure as ever, with a touch of colour in the cheeks that became her wonderfully. Henderson was moved to think that the Sugden household might yet be worth his

study, even at the price of a weekly service. He was more than ordinarily pleasant that night, and went out of his way to include Mrs. Sugden in the conversation. Once or twice he succeeded in inducing Evelyn to smile.

“I think he improves on acquaintance,” admitted the lady of the house afterwards, and added that she was glad to see him at church. Her husband, a trifle wearied with the labours of the day, nodded cheerily. Henderson himself was walking home at that moment with long strides, in more than ordinarily good spirits. The place was not so deadly dull, after all.

“She has possibilities, that girl,” he was thinking. “Distinct possibilities. I should like to see her when she begins to live, when she understands what life means. She wants to be melted. A kiss would do it—or half a dozen, let us say, well bestowed. Gad ! I’ve more than half a mind to superintend her education.” He chuckled as he strode homewards. He had never met a girl of just that type before in all his travels. It was beginning to be quite interesting.

CHAPTER IV

YOU may possibly recollect, if you are in the habit of reading the newspapers, and if your memory is good for the kind of reading they furnish, the famous "Stourton Tragedy" of about the time of Sargent Henderson's brief sojourn in those regions. Not that the papers made quite as much of it as they might have, had the occurrence taken place in a more readily accessible spot. There was, too, if we remember right, a "Sloane Square Mystery" running at the same time, which naturally provided reporters with more easily procurable detail—to say nothing of a divorce case that promised to be more than ordinarily attractive. Still, the press did their best for the little provincial affair: it had its own head-lines in the morning papers for a day or two, and one or two reporters from the great city insisted upon interviewing Henderson himself, who, from all accounts, treated them with scant courtesy. The doctor had his own reasons for not wishing his name to appear in the papers. With all his faults, he had none of that hankering after publicity that so often troubles meaner spirits, and it happened actually that his name was only mentioned by one paper, and that in a casual reference to

“the able local practitioner, Dr. Henderson.” Yet his real share in the business was by no means an unimportant one, and it led to certain developments that have their place in this story.

It was in early June. Another week, and the Barnards would be coming back to Stourton, and Henderson would be free to escape from a place that he had once stigmatised as the dullest spot on the face of the globe. Such is the fickleness of mankind that, as the moment of his release approached, he grew less and less anxious for its arrival. He felt that he stood upon the threshold of a discovery. Here was this young girl, outwardly shy as a fawn, cold as ice ; and yet there began to be signs of the timidity vanishing, of the ice thawing. She still was apt to redden when they met by chance in the street, but she smiled as well ; she could even enter into conversation. And Henderson, the man to whom morality was a matter of climate, felt in the position of an explorer who has just set his foot in some new, fair, unknown region when the peremptory summons reaches him to retrace his steps. This was unendurable, and he debated seriously whether he should not stay on awhile in Stourton after the Barnards had returned.

I fear that Henderson thought little of any after effect that his action might have—either upon himself or the girl. It was not his habit to take much thought for the morrow ; his maxim was to warm both hands at the fire of life, to acquire knowledge at any cost, to gain experience—in a word, to live. And at six-and-twenty years of age he had certainly amassed a larger store of curious memories than falls to the lot of many during a lifetime.

He had explored strange by-paths ; he had lived in lands where men were quick to quarrel, and women quick to love, and his appetite for novelty was whetted rather than sated by the bitter herb, experience. Fortunately, Nature was inexhaustible. Even here, where he had expected so little, she provided him of her bounty with a new sensation.

In a way he liked the girl—as a healthy man can scarcely avoid liking a pretty woman who displays any interest in his personality. He was not in love. Had any one suggested the possibility of such a condition to him he might have been gently amused, from the height of his superior knowledge of the world, but would certainly not have taken the accusation seriously. He regarded himself as one who had graduated in that mystery, not without honours. He was sure of himself. But women—they, he admitted, were a riddle to which there was no all-embracing solution. At once the natural prey of man and his most fascinating study, they afforded endless possibilities to the man of science. And if the key of that complex nature was ever to be found at all, it were surely discoverable in the young and unsophisticated. The specimen to his hand was as pure and pellucid as any he could hope to meet : it would be a thousand pities to leave it before it had been subjected to a thorough examination.

The unconscious object of this scientific inquiry, on the other hand, found herself in a state of turmoil and agitation very strange to one of her limited experience. The poor child, whose life had hitherto been passed in placid, almost dull, monotony, found her bosom suddenly

become the battle-ground of new and conflicting emotions. She felt herself changed—she knew not how. This strange man, who had descended suddenly upon the quiet neighbourhood like an inhabitant of another sphere, fascinated her ; she could not keep her thoughts away from him. And now it seemed that they were always meeting, and she grew to hope for these casual occurrences day by day. She found a secret pleasure in them—a pleasure that frightened her, for was it not a sin ? Must not every secret pleasure be sinful ? She dared speak of it to none—not even to her mother, from whom she had never hidden anything before, for more than a day or two at furthest. There was the test—the infallible test supplied by conscience—and yet she felt herself powerless to speak, when speaking might confirm her suspicions and mean the loss of everything. After all, where was the harm in a chance meeting, a smile, a few words ? Instinct told her that it was dangerous. She felt herself stepping from firm ground into waters of unknown depth, with little but religion for her support. And behold ! when most she wanted that support she was unwilling to employ it. Sometimes, after pursuing some such train of thought as this, she would be seized with a sudden terror, and fall upon her knees to pray in vague terms for safety and a happy issue.

How weak, she thought, a girl was ! How much in need of support ! And at this reflection what more natural than for Henderson's face and figure to come up before her, as indeed they were never very far from her mind ? A strong face—a strong, self-sufficient man—some one upon whom she could lean in absolute security.

She felt dimly that all her vague self-reproaches, all her troubles of conscience, would silence themselves for ever if she could tell him all, if her own self could be abandoned and merged in his. She could wish to give herself to such a man, utterly and completely. The thought flashed upon her that this meant—marriage. Did she love him, then? Was love compatible with a sort of fear? Sometimes she had been, she was still, afraid of him. She lived in a confused welter of thought.

And he was going away soon—in a few days. What would life be like then? The mind refused to picture a return to the old monotonous routine, once so full of quiet happiness. In a week's time he would be gone. It was with this thought uppermost in her mind that Evelyn Sugden, one bright Monday morning in early June, recollected of a sudden that she had some visiting to do in the village—perhaps recollected also that Dr. Henderson was often to be seen in the street himself at about that time—and put on her hat with a strange fluttering at the heart. It was the day of the Stourton tragedy—a day that Stourton and the neighbourhood remember still to date events from, however faint it may have grown in your memory.

Evelyn walked out into the garden. It was a lovely morning. The grinding clatter of the stone-crushing machine at the nearest quarry, even the thick smoke drifting over from the tall chimney, were powerless altogether to destroy the beauty of the day. In wet weather they were gloomy and depressing; when the sun shone warmly above they seemed to carry another message; they were visible signs of wholesome labour and pros-

perity—an offence perhaps to the æsthetic soul, but not displeasing to the philanthropic. The girl's spirits rose as she passed out into the warm sunshine.

She went down the pathway by the old stone church towards the village in a strange tremor of anticipation. Her hand shook as she unlatched the gate at the end of the path and passed out into the street. He might be there: they might meet. As a fact they generally did meet somehow on those Monday mornings—and they were the pleasantest meetings of all. She was not so shy as usual then, not so afraid of him: it seemed as if they were only renewing a conversation of the night before. And yet she was always nervous now at the mere thought of seeing him—nervous with a sort of pleasurable apprehension.

She paid two visits, and then the thought struck her that she would walk out along the Fleckney road as far as Miss Fisher's house and back again. It was a pity to go in again at once on so fine a day, and, besides, Miss Fisher had not been well lately. She might stop and inquire after her. Underneath this thought lay another, not suffered to express itself consciously, that perhaps the doctor might be there on a similar errand.

Stourton village was empty and deserted in appearance. The children were at school, the men at the quarries or working in the fields. She passed the blacksmith's shop—the one centre of interest to the village loafer (with the exception of the "Stourton Arms" and the "Red Cow")—and saw the village policeman standing solitary at the door, watching the smith mend a harrow. About two hundred yards further on she noticed Mr. Smith, the

eccentric market-gardener, busy sharpening something on the grindstone in his backyard. She watched him for a moment, impelled by a purely feminine curiosity, for she could not quite see what the implement was. These three seemed to be the only men in the village that morning.

How curiously things happen in a world of coincidence! She had scarcely turned the corner leading to the Fleckney road when she saw a figure approaching from the opposite direction. There was no mistaking the walk, the tall, upright carriage, and the way in which he swung his stick. It was Dr. Henderson. For a moment Evelyn thought of turning in flight. This was terrible, to approach slowly along a flat, straight road, with no possibility of escape on either side. He must be coming back from Miss Fisher. She might have known it would happen like that. Her heart was beating frantically, she could fancy it audible yards away. He came rapidly nearer. She wondered despairingly if she were looking absurdly red or pitifully white. Well! it had to be gone through now. She walked forward, unable to raise her eyes from the ground. They met.

“Good-morning, Miss Sugden. Isn’t it a jolly day? I see you are bitten with the detective craze, studying the road to see who has been along it this morning. Confess now—you’ve been reading Sherlock Holmes after what I told you last night.”

He laughed merrily. At the first sound of his voice—was it not strange?—all her ridiculous nervousness vanished utterly. She looked up frankly in his face

and laughed too. It was one of the reasons of Henderson's success with women (when he chose to succeed) that he was never afraid of chaffing them. Nothing establishes mutual confidence so readily as laughter. Evelyn became her natural self again in a moment.

"I was going to Miss Fisher's," she said, "to ask after her. How is she?"

"In the finest talking trim," Henderson replied promptly. "May I come back with you? I'm idle this morning—so far." She smiled assent, and they walked together to the old lady's door. She put out her hand. The doctor's blue eyes met hers for a moment with that curiously penetrating look of theirs that always half frightened and half fascinated her.

"I should like to see you back, if I may," he said. "It's not often I get a chance of talking to you."

He had never spoken to her quite in that way before, and the girl's heart fluttered. She felt herself on the brink of something new and strange, and could hardly muster words for reply. Once safely inside the door she was angry with herself for this silly nervousness. What was there to be afraid of? Why could she not talk to him like any one else? There could be nothing to fear in the man: he was good, honourable, a gentleman: he came regularly to church—much more regularly than old Dr. Barnard. No! she was not afraid of him, she was afraid of herself. When he was near her she seemed to lose control over her speech, sometimes; she was in a sort of dream: she might be capable of saying or doing anything. And yet she grudged every minute that she spent listening to the garrulous old lady

inside. She wanted to be with him again, to be under the spell once more. Her remarks, on the rare occasions when Miss Fisher broke the stream of her monologue, were not, I fear, very much to the point. In less than ten minutes she was out again in the sunshine.

The sun lit up the pretty figure in its plain white summer dress as it stood for a moment irresolutely in the porch. Henderson, watching her from the path, decided that she was growing prettier day by day. "And to think that I never noticed her at all when I first came," he exclaimed to himself. "Well! I'm not generally blind." He smiled rather grimly, reflecting upon past adventures. Then, as they turned homewards together, he set himself to talk.

I do not know that Henderson, at that moment, meant any harm to the girl. The habit was natural to him, and he had seldom attempted to curb himself; when he met any one who took his fancy for the moment he was accustomed to make love to her, in greater or less degree. And he had been without any of this pleasing excitement for a long time now; so, as a consequence, he went perhaps rather further in this vein than was usual with him. He liked Evelyn: she was more interesting than any one he had met for a long time; and it was delightful to watch the shy, timorous nature gradually unfold itself. There might be trouble in the future, but Sargent Henderson had never paid much heed to the future. It was his creed to enjoy the present, and let the coming years take care of themselves.

He made it very clear to Evelyn that he admired her, which indeed was sufficiently true. And she was

woman enough to like being admired. He did not, of course, say so in so many words, but his manner betrayed him. He was an adept at the game, and she was but a simple country girl. Once it crossed his mind that it was hardly fair, but it was very pleasant—too pleasant to leave off for any absurd scruple. Besides, it was good for her—a sort of education that she sadly needed: a pretty girl can never learn too early the meaning of love.

“How quiet the village is to-day!” said Evelyn suddenly. They had got to the turn at the end of the village street, where it branches into the Fleckney road. “There’s not a soul anywhere—not even by the blacksmith’s shop. I wonder what every one is doing.”

“There’s some one at any rate,” Henderson answered. “No! she’s gone to earth like a rabbit.” A woman ran hastily across the road some hundred paces in front of them and vanished into a doorway. “The lady seemed to be in a hurry. By Jove! and there’s another. That’s funny.” His brow contracted for a moment as they walked on: he was reflecting that he had seen something rather like that somewhere else. He could not remember the circumstances at first. Then he recollectedit had been a mad dog.

They came to the blacksmith’s shop, and behold! the forge was empty, a few tools thrown in confusion on the floor. Henderson came to a halt suddenly. A pale terrified face looked out of a window hard by, and a hand rapped on the pane and beckoned furiously. Then a sound of running footsteps, and the village policeman came down the hill towards them at his best pace. Now

it is unusual to see a village policeman run, especially when in uniform. There was something wrong, that was obvious. Evelyn looked up at him with startled eyes.

“Go in there,” he said quietly in a new voice—a voice of command—and motioned to the door by her side, now timidly opening. He did not take his eyes off the approaching figure.

• Evelyn pulled at his sleeve, with a very white face. “Oh, come too,” she pleaded, “do come in too.”

He turned and smiled down at her, merrily as ever. “What, and lose all the fun?” he said. “No, I must see this through now—I assure you there’ll be no danger.” His appearance was so reassuring that she almost believed him; and as she hesitated the woman inside opened the door and pulled her in hastily. It was done in a second, and the door closed again, with the sound of a shot bolt.

Henderson took two steps into the middle of the road and held up his hand. The policeman, charging madly down, faltered in his stride. “Stop!” said the doctor quietly. The man pulled himself up with a visible effort, glancing backwards over his shoulder. His face was white, and his forehead strewn with beads of perspiration: he had the look of a man in abject fear. He panted like one who runs in a dream.

“Pull yourself together, man,” said Henderson sharply. “Say what’s wrong, and be quick with it.” The voice cut like a whip-lash. He grasped the man by the shoulder to steady him. “Now then! be a man, if you can, and speak out.”

“It’s murder, sir,” stammered the other at last, gasping

for breath. "Mr. Smith's gone mad—killed his wife and child, an' half the parish by now, very like. Lord help us, here 'e comes. Let go, sir, for God's sake." He struggled to loose Henderson's grip. Another strange figure appeared on the crest of the village hill, walking swiftly towards them, swinging something in his hand that glittered strangely. "Come away, sir, for the love of Heaven. 'E's got a sword."

Henderson's face flushed with anger. "Stand still, you cur, or by God ! I'll kill you myself." He hissed the words with such fury that the man obeyed him. "Now stand by me, and don't move till I tell you, unless you see him coming for me. Then go in and grapple him behind, while I take him in front. D'ye see ? And if you still want to run—run and be damned ! "

The man stood up stiffly, though his face was the colour of ashes, and saluted. "I'll stay, sir," he said. There is a contagious influence in cool courage ; the mere sight of it will often rally a man, if he has anything in him at all—and in the constable there was a spirit, of sorts, though it had failed him at the crisis.

The madman walked briskly down the street, the weapon held behind his back as he approached the two men. He made as if to go by them along the pavement. Perhaps the fit was over for the present, the thirst for blood sated. But Henderson was not the man to let him go. He stepped across swiftly, and stood directly in his way. The constable followed, with an effort, behind him. Then he spoke, quite quietly but firmly, with his eyes fixed on the other's shifting gaze.

"Give that up to me, Mr. Smith. You have done enough mischief for one day."

There was a moment's hesitation, while the other's eyes wavered like those of a hunted animal seeking some way of escape. And then suddenly the poor maniac dropped his weapon, covered his face with his hands, and burst out crying like a little child.

"Take him in to Fleckney," said Henderson in a low voice, as the policeman picked up the blood-stained sword. "There'll be an inquest and a trial and Heaven knows what," he added with a sigh. "And look here, my man, next time you lose your head, pull yourself up a bit sooner, or you'll get into trouble. He'll go quiet enough now ; the fit's over."

Mrs. Fitchett, Evelyn's friend in need, stood at her window and watched the scene in mingled terror and admiration, providing for the benefit of her half-fainting guest a lively running commentary on all that came within her view. In her artless language the story lost nothing of its dramatic intensity, the hero, you may be sure, nothing of his cool daring. And when it was over, and he came to the door, and old Mrs. Fitchett let him in, Evelyn forgot all decorum—she was not nineteen yet—in her great gladness at his safety, and in the glow of her admiration for his bravery. It may have been his fault, or perhaps it only seemed to her that he stretched out his arms, but of a sudden she found herself with her face on his shoulder, saying all manner of tearful incoherencies. And it is not easy to blame Henderson severely if he bent over and kissed her cheek. Only, he

should have stopped there, if Henderson had ever known when to stop. Alas ! he never did know ; he was perhaps just a little thrown off his balance by the nervous tension of the last few minutes, and that first kiss seemed to inflame him to a kind of madness. He took the unresisting girl in his arms and kissed her again and again, while old Mrs. Fitchett, after one look of amazed surprise, retired discreetly into the kitchen. Thus were the seeds of a second tragedy sown in Stourton village that fine June morning.

CHAPTER V

IT took, as you may readily imagine, some little time for the Stourton neighbourhood generally to recover from the shock caused by discovering that they had harboured a murderer in their midst, even though the murderer was a homicidal maniac. This detracted in a sense from the interest of the event, since it was improbable that the man would be hanged, but again it added to the horror. "To think that any one of us might have been walking along that road!" said the wives of several neighbouring clergymen, suddenly discovering that it was only by the mercy of Providence that they had not chosen that morning to walk over and see Mrs. Sugden about that next meeting of the G.F.S. This reflection brought it home to them: it gave an added thrill of not unpleasant excitement. For it is one thing to read about murders at Balham or Brixton, quite another to hear the details at first hand from eye-witnesses of a tragedy enacted only three miles from your own doors. London and the suburbs must have their criminals: they are proper to the soil. 'Tis only to be expected that where so many are gathered together, collected by the common desire of making money, burg-

lary, violence, and murder should be rife. But in the country—the quiet, orderly, peaceable country—these things seem strangely out of place. An occasional drunkard, a few cases of petty larceny, now and again a summons for assault : these, with a poaching case or two, formed the sum of crime dealt with weekly by the magistrates at Fleckney Petty Sessions. And here was a real murder, a subject of interest to the kingdom, actually accorded a paragraph in the *Times*, half a column in the *Standard*, a full column and a quarter in the *Daily Telegraph*. Stourton blushed with pride to find itself famous ; upon the neighbourhood for five miles round there shone faint gleams of its reflected glory.

Still, if the countryside had produced a villain, it had some right to congratulate itself on the compensating fact that it had also provided a hero. And, after all, poor Mr. Smith was not much of a villain. Everybody had known him ; he was wont to perambulate the district for miles round with his horse and four-wheeled cart, selling fruit and vegetables. Everybody knew he was eccentric ; many declared now that they had always expected something of this sort to happen. “And just imagine,” said Fanny Weston, the vivacious daughter of the old clergyman at Willoughby, “just imagine the folly of those people. There he was all the morning, poor man, sharpening a sword on his grindstone, in full view of the road. Evelyn Sugden saw him herself, they tell me, and never thought of mentioning it to any one. I always thought that girl was a little fool.” Miss Weston was apt, perhaps, to be a little hard on Evelyn in conversation. Once she had been the beauty of the

neighbourhood herself—twenty years ago she had been of Evelyn's age, and with more men at her feet than “that poor little shy thing” would ever have. Somehow, the county was livelier in those days—but this is a digression.

The extent of the damage, too, was not so great as had been reported at first. Rumour was rife in the surrounding villages on that terrible Monday afternoon, and half the parish were reported to be lying dead, or mangled beyond hope of recovery. Some said Miss Sugden was amongst the slain ; most declared the doctor dangerously wounded. As a fact, the man had killed his wife, severely wounded another woman, and considerably damaged the nerves of perhaps a dozen more, including the blacksmith and policeman. Some began to feel that Smith made but a poor-spirited villain, and breathed scorn upon the two men who had seen him pursuing his second victim without attempting to save her. They had not been on the spot themselves ; if they had—well ! there is no knowing what these gallant fellows would not have done.

Timson, the policeman, who was held only partially to have redeemed himself by conducting the prisoner to Fleckney subsequently, had at all events the courage of his opinions when some of the quarry-men broached these views. He would shake his head and say, “ You'd all 'ave run, same as I did : that's what you'd have done. I tell you I was afeard o' my life, an' so you'd 'ave been. You don't reckon to see a man you've knowed all your days coming at you with a bloody sword.” Which was no doubt true enough, but failed altogether to silence some of the scoffers.

"Yes ; I was afeard o' my life," Timson would repeat gloomily. "An' the Doctor, 'e called me names for it—called me cruel, 'e did—and I 'adn't so much as a word to give 'im back. That 'Enderson, 'e's a man right enough, and I'll take anythink as he likes to give me. What was you doing ? Sitting down comfortable in a shed, squaring. You don't know nothink about it at all. It'd be a deal better if some folks would 'old their noise."

Henderson, indeed, was the hero of the hour in the village, and not in the village only. The whole countryside rang with his praises. That was the sort of man, said every male voice in the neighbourhood, the sort of man we wanted in this degenerate age—the kind that don't lose their heads in a crisis, the kind that have made old England what she is. A chap who'd knocked about the world a bit, and not spent all his life in a drawing-room ; a man who had faced perils before, and didn't get knocked out of time by the first danger he met. And if the men were enthusiastic, you may be certain the women did not lag far behind. Courage and physical strength still have power to dominate the feminine heart, as in the days of old ; and no amount of civilisation will ever entirely eradicate the primal instincts of mankind. The few who had not met Henderson were eager to see him ; those who had happened to employ his services assumed airs of importance. Invitations began suddenly to flutter into the doctor's house like homing doves. Of not one of them did Henderson take the smallest notice. He was in a bad temper.

He had these fits of moodiness at times, in which he

would sit down at home for hours together, companionless, gazing at vacancy, scarcely moving from his seat except to fill or light a pipe. Then, perhaps, he would take a long walk in the country and return himself again, the demon exorcised. This is the worst of your reckless liver : he is apt to possess a familiar demon. Among the memories with which his mind becomes stored there are pretty certain to be one or two that he would like to forget. It was so now and again with Sargent Henderson, though he was one of those men who could carry a larger load of unpleasant experience than most without a sign. It was only when something pulled him up suddenly, as it were, and made him think, that he permitted himself to be disturbed by any of these vagrant memories.

Just now there was something that occupied his mind with unusual persistency, bidding fair to involve him in a protracted series of argument, reasoning, and expostulation with himself—a sort of civil warfare that annoyed him exceedingly, but was difficult to avert at times. Here was the better Henderson arrayed against the worse, the worse against the better—a silly state of things, a *divisum imperium*, a house divided against itself, a condition of affairs that wise men have reprobated in all ages. Yet it was not so much a case of smarting conscience, a trouble that seldom affected him for more than a passing moment. Why indeed should conscience trouble him ? He had his creed, and, to do him justice, generally lived up to it. To the pit with all religions, dogmas, conventions, moralities—that was his creed, with the saving clause added—Fair play, and fear nothing,

neither God nor devil : two abstractions that embraced and included mankind in general.

No ! conscience had not much to do with Henderson. It does not concern itself with men who formulate a creed of their own and abide by it. Nor was he troubled with remorse for past sins, seeing that any crimes he might have committed were not in his view crimes at all. They were, some of them, regrettable incidents, because they brought him into conflict with certain old-established and foolish prejudices ; they placed obstacles in his path ; they limited in a sense his liberty of action. It was the recollection of these little matters that occasionally annoyed him. An absurd world, was it not ? in which one has to move so delicately for fear of running up against some ridiculous barbed-wire fence of convention. It is easy enough to despise these restrictions, but to burst through them involves almost always a nasty scratch or two, which may turn into a festering wound and give cause for angry reflection years afterwards.

What annoyed Henderson more than anything was the thought that, after all these years, he had not yet succeeded in ordering his life by rule. He could not yet keep himself in hand ; he was still liable to break loose at the critical moment, give rein to his impulse, and do more than he had ever intended. Throughout his life he could trace a series of awkward incidents, brought about by no other cause. He had run headlong into actions that his saner self repudiated—actions of which the after-effects still cramped and confined his life. And it seemed he was still liable to play the fool—to go too far. Confound it ! he had made a pretty mess of things. It came

of playing that old game—studying the nature of the sex. He had meant to watch an interesting physiological development, and, as usual, he had not pulled himself up in time. He had wanted to see the shy, pretty, carefully-nurtured girl become alive to the meaning of things, and blossom into a woman. Well, he had had his wish, and she had fallen in love with him, and, by all the gods ! in another minute he would be in love with her if he didn't watch it. So he phrased it to himself, sitting in Barnard's study, smoking like a banked furnace. And it was not fair on the girl.

It was not fair. On that point conscience asserted itself, for that was a part of his creed. Any way you looked at it, it was cruelly hard on her. To go away and say nothing would be bad enough ; to stay on and marry her would be worse ; to tell her the whole truth—obviously the right course of action—would nevertheless be brutal. There was no other way, and yet something had to be done. "If I were consistent," he said to himself, "I suppose I should trust to luck and marry the child. But it wouldn't do ; luck never serves in those matters, and then it would be just hell." He cursed certain incidents of his past life with great fluency for five minutes. "And she's a nice girl, too. Pity I can't pull up in time. And it's worth while to be loved by one of that sort. Just sinful waste to chuck it up, but that's what it has to come to. I'll tell old Sugden tomorrow. And I won't see her again : it'll be better for her like that."

While Henderson was debating with himself thus at the Barnards' house, Evelyn and her mother were talking

on the same subject, with a difference, at the Rectory. For Mrs. Sugden could not but notice something strange in her daughter of late, and she was a woman of insight and sympathy, to whom even strangers might be ready to confide their secrets. She had gone into her daughter's bedroom on the Monday night, fearing that she might be nervous after all she had gone through that day, and had found her standing at the window, still dressed, in a sort of dream. To Evelyn the whole world seemed to have changed : the foundations of her life were broken up. She loved—she was loved—she had felt his arms around her and his kisses on her mouth. She was his—his only—and nothing could ever separate them now. The thought was pure happiness—a raging, tumultuous happiness such as she had never dreamed of in the old days. She stood aloof in a sort of divine ecstasy, apart from the world, a creature of different clay. And yet, behind it all, there was the old religion, the old family love, habit and custom. Submerged for the moment, she could feel their presence. Could they be reconciled with the new order ? And her mother, her father—what would they think of it all ? Could she even tell them how strange a thing had happened, how she had suddenly been transported away from them to a new sphere ? Oh, if she could only tell them everything and get it over, it would be a load off her mind, she would feel twice as happy, she would have no more lurking doubts. For was it right to possess this new-found happiness ? She dreamed, and sighed, and fell to dreaming once more.

And then came her mother and put her arms round her gently, just in the old way, and spoke to her in the

old kind voice, and through the new love came the old with a sudden rush, blending in one, and she nestled again in her arms and hid her face, for the tension was over, dissolved in a flood of tears, as is the way with women. And her mother stroked her hair gently, with pitying fingers, and soothed her to undress and get into bed, and sitting by her side, still holding her hand, asked if she were unhappy.

“Mother darling,” she said in a low voice, “I am happy—too happy.” The little hot hand beneath the bed-clothes squeezed her mother’s in a spasmodic grasp. Mrs. Sugden bent over and kissed her child, and said good-night.

“I think I can guess, dearie,” was all she said. And she went away half-doubtful, half-sorrowful, and yet wholly filled with curiously tender reminiscences of her own courtship. And so it had come to that: the cycle had fulfilled itself: her own child had become a woman. She had felt it coming, dimly, from afar. To-morrow she would hear the whole story; in the meanwhile not a word to any one. She could wait in patience, secure in the possession of the essential fact; she could not share it even with her husband, while so much remained to be told. For much of that night mother and daughter alike lay wakeful, revolving many things in their minds, while Sugden snored a deep bass, very comforting to hear.

Evelyn had her breakfast in bed next morning. Mrs. Sugden foresaw, with matronly wisdom, that her child would speak more easily from beneath the warm shelter of the bed-clothes. And by the time Dr. Hendersou

had crushed his hat on to his head and sallied out for a morning round—partly with the idea of exorcising the evil spirit that tormented him—the secret was out, the faltering story told, and the turmoil in the girl's breast was subsiding into a happy calm.

CHAPTER VI

SUGDEN was later than usual that day for lunch, it seemed to his anxious wife, who had news of such importance to communicate to him. And when he did arrive at last he appeared perturbed. The worthy man was never gloomy, it is true, but sometimes he had fits of partial silence. It was a bad sign when he was not heard whistling or singing outside the door, before he burst in upon his meal. Yet even at the worst the indomitable man preserved his sense of fun. Some serious brethren held that he overdid the habit, that he turned everything into ridicule, that he was little better than a buffoon. Serious brethren are apt to under-estimate the value of humour. Sugden may occasionally have appeared ludicrous, but his high spirits helped him to accomplish more work than any other clergyman in the diocese. And not only that : they infected all around him with a cheerful gaiety, which made the hardest of tasks seem trifling. The Sugdens seldom changed their servants, and this was not solely due to the influence of the lady of the house, excellent manager though she was.

He entered the room now with an expression of exaggerated woe, groaning pitifully, his hands crossed

upon his burly chest. He sat down heavily and raised up his voice in more tuneful lamentation.

“I am poured out like water,” he said. “All my bones are out of joint. Fat bulls of Bashan close me in on every side : they gape upon me with their mouths.” He laughed. Sugden would quote the Psalms in ordinary conversation, and think no harm. Many held up their hands in horror at such irreverence. But if we may quote poetry at all, why not the Psalms, which make certainly better poetry than most modern writers can produce ? Sugden had views upon Reverence, which he had once embodied in a sermon, chiefly for Henderson’s benefit. It may be doubted whether that gentleman derived much benefit from their enunciation, but in themselves the views were sufficiently sound.

Mrs. Sugden went on placidly with her sewing at the other end of the table. “When you’ve finished your lunch, dear,” she said, “I have something to talk over with you seriously.” She stifled a sigh. Here was a moment of which she had often dreamed—the moment when she might discuss with her husband the subject of Evy’s marriage. And now it seemed to have burst suddenly upon her without warning, and to have upset all her cherished plans. To talk of it was no pleasure at all—or hardly. Henderson was not the sort of husband she had desired for her daughter. Yet, if she wished it so it would have to be. Love was everything, in the eyes of this simple woman : if they loved each other God had joined their hands ; to tear them asunder would be a sort of sacrilege.

The Rector threw up his hands in simulated alarm.

“Seriously! My love, I am serious as a boiled owl.” He chuckled for a moment. Mrs. Sugden smiled faintly. “Well! if I’m not serious I ought to be,” he continued. “I ought to be angry, and I *was* angry at first, but somehow I can’t keep it up. I never could. But this village is a hotbed of gossip. What do you think is the last notion they’ve got into their silly heads? So old Miss Fisher says—she declares it’s the talk of the whole village.” He looked up, smiling, for an answer.

Mrs. Sugden dropped her sewing on her lap, and met his eyes, a little anxiously.

“It wasn’t about Evy?” Even as she asked the question she felt a sure premonition of the reply. Sugden’s eyes widened in amazement; he opened his mouth as if to speak, but only succeeded in drawing a long breath.

“Bless my soul!” he said at last, frowning in hard thought. “Bless me! you don’t say there’s anything in it? Evy and young Henderson? What did you hear? My heart! this beats everything.” He began to pace up and down the room like a caged beast. “It’s true, is it?” He pulled his beard in deep reflection. “Well! I never! When did you hear it? Who told you?”

“She told me herself, just now.” A tear fell upon the flannel in her lap, and Mrs. Sugden felt furtively for her pocket-handkerchief.

“But is it true they’re actually engaged? That’s what they say in the village, according to that fool of an old woman. Henderson’s said nothing to me.” He wheeled round sharply. “What’s your own opinion of it?”

The handkerchief was hastily put aside, but not before he had noticed it. Sugden came near and put his arm gently round her. The big man's heart was very tender. "Is it as bad as all that?" he said softly. "Poor little woman. I don't like the thought of losing her myself," he confessed. "But these things will happen. We don't grow any younger, dear."

"I—don't somehow—quite—like him—much," came in a rather unsteady voice.

Sugden's brows contracted again in thought, as he stroked his wife's hair. "And yet I think he's straight," he mused, "and a good chap in his way. But he ought to have told me first—only they never do. Did I, my sweet? I am afraid not. No! probably he means to come and have it out with me—and perhaps it would be as well if I went over there at once and found out the whole truth. Where's Evy? In bed? Poor little girl. They grow up, and take us all unawares, don't they? Well! it's the way of the world." He sighed.

"Will he make her happy, do you think? Oh, and she is so young! They will have to wait—ever such a time." It was surprising how the face brightened at this suggestion. "And perhaps—he is going away soon—perhaps they need not be engaged—just yet."

Her husband smiled and patted her on the shoulder.

"There! little woman. Never mind! Who knows what will turn up? I'll go and see him when I've finished my lunch, which is none the better for waiting all this time. Heavens! what a life it is. And so they've fallen in love. Well! I'm not altogether surprised, though it never occurred to me before. We men

are proverbially blind—blind as black-beetles.” It never took Sugden very long to recover his normal spirits. “It may be all for the best, after all. Cheer up. The man’s got pluck, anyway. The village has gone mad about him over this last business, and the whole county too for that matter. I don’t know that I wouldn’t as soon have him for a son-in-law as most. He’ll take care of her. Eh? What do you think?”

“Yes, dear, I dare say he will. But—somehow——”

“You don’t like the thought of losing the girl,” pursued Sugden, cheerfully. “More do I, my love. But these things have to come, and we old people have to make the best of them. Evy’s growing up, you see; she’ll be nineteen before you can look round, and where were you at nineteen? Ahm thinkin’ we were engaged by then, if no exactly mairried.”

Sugden finished his lunch, walked to the window and stood there a few minutes, playing a tattoo on the panes with his finger-tips. He was reluctant to go until he had brought his wife to see things from his own optimistic point of view. He hummed a lively air.

“Henderson’s clever enough,” he said after a pause. “He’ll get on if he tries—and there’s nothing to spur a man on like falling in love. After all, money doesn’t matter as long as they love each other—and have enough to live on, eh? You feel better about it now, don’t you?” He turned to her with a look half tender, half quizzical. “Shall I go and beard the lion in his den?”

His wife smiled bravely. “Yes, dear, I’m feeling better now,” she said. “It does me good to talk things over with you. I was silly, I’m afraid.”

“ Faith, if you were silly, so was I. Here’s luck ! ” He kissed her on the forehead, and was gone. Half a minute later the front door slammed violently, and he was off on his mission.

Sugden was not by nature a nervous man, and yet somehow he felt conscious that he did not altogether like his task. It was rather a delicate business, when all was said, approaching a man in this way, demanding (in the old time-honoured phrase) to know his intentions. Henderson ought to have come to him ; in a sense it was undignified for the father to go running after his daughter’s lover, like this. But there ! he had never stood upon his dignity, and he was not going to begin now. His first duty was to see the matter settled. It was intolerable that his daughter’s affairs should be the talk of the village. Yes ; Henderson should have told him before.

“ I ought to be angry, I suppose,” he said to himself, and laughed aloud as he walked down the village street. “ I ought to play the heavy father—instead of which—— ”

He thought he saw how the interview would go, but he wished it well over. He hurried and loitered by turns, revolving many things in his swift mind. He came to the gate and paused ; took a grip on himself, went through hastily, and rang the bell. It was ridiculous feeling so nervous : he remembered nothing like it since he had sat in the Cambridge boat at Putney, waiting for the start. It was worse than his first sermon.

He rang. Was Mr. Henderson in ? Mr. Henderson

was in, and his presence discernible by means of a strong smell of tobacco.

“Ah! Sugden, this is good of you, I was half expecting you to call to-day. Sit down and have a cheroot.” There was no nervousness about the doctor at any rate. He seemed unaffectedly glad to see his visitor, settled him in an armchair, pulled out a box of Manillas, pressed one upon him, and sat down opposite.

Sugden cast about him for some way of opening the subject. It was not easy, but Henderson saved him trouble by proceeding to ask after the family.

“How is Miss Sugden?” he asked. “I hope she is none the worse for all these excitements. I’ve had two rogues of reporters in here already, but I don’t fancy they’ll trouble me much more.” He spoke in his usual quiet, rather lazy voice, which was wont at times to take on just a touch of American intonation.

Sugden cleared his throat and plunged in bravely. “It’s about Evelyn I’ve come,” he said bluntly. Finesse was never his strongest point. “As you know, my dear fellow, she is my only girl, and well—I dare say we think about her rather too much for her good. It gave me quite a shock when I heard the news this morning. You see, frankly, I hadn’t expected it: it had never entered my mind. Like most fathers, I suppose, I hadn’t noticed that she was growing up so fast.” The father’s voice was a little husky. He paused, gazing at the empty fireplace.

Henderson did not immediately reply. He flicked the ash off his cheroot into the fender and studied the glowing end minutely. Then he spoke.

"Oh ! you've heard all about it." His face was impassive as a mask.

"Well ! it's the talk of the village. And Evy told her mother, who, naturally, told me. I must say I wish it could have come from you first. I don't care about my daughter's name being made free with in village gossip." Sugden was getting just a little ruffled.

"Yes—I thought of telling you," replied the other, meditatively. "The trouble was I had nothing very definite to say."

"What ? You don't mean to say—— But, man alive, it's impossible." Sugden could not remain seated any longer : he began to pace up and down the room. He stopped and turned sharply on his host. "She told her mother this morning—Henderson ! you've not been fooling that poor child ?" There was something tragic in the father's broken sentences. "No ! I can't believe you'd be such an utter blackguard. What is it ? What did happen ? She says you kissed her."

Henderson rose slowly, and leaned his tall figure against the mantelpiece. He gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders.

"That was so," he said, with a touch of weariness.

The clergyman turned upon him in a white heat of passion.

"What ! You stand there calmly and tell me you kissed my daughter, and meant nothing by it. And I—I thought you were at least a man, you pitiful mean blackguard. A girl of eighteen ! And she thinks you love her. God help the poor child, she thinks that she

loves you. You ! I would sooner she married a labourer out of the fields." For perhaps the first time in his life the good-natured, kindly-tempered parson was in a violent rage.

Henderson's eyebrows lowered a little. Then he stood suddenly erect, squared his shoulders, and looked the other in the face.

"Now I'll tell you something," he began, deliberately as ever, "and when I've finished you can call me what you please. I'm sorry for you, Sugden. You're a good sort in the main, and you've been friendly, and if it eases you to call me a blackguard, I've no objection. I dare say there's the making of one in me. It's true enough I kissed the girl. What's more, if she thinks I love her, as you say, she's right. I do ; but——"

"Then why in the name of wonder——"

The other arrested him with outstretched hand.

"Wait a moment ! You may just as well hear me out. I tell you frankly I'd marry Evelyn to-morrow if I could, and I'd do my level best to make her happy. What's more, if I were the blackguard you call me, I'd do it, whatever the lot of you said or did. The trouble is, I'm not such a low-down cur as you think. I won't marry her, because it wouldn't be fair on the girl." He turned to knock another half-inch of ash from his cheroot.

"You say you love her and won't marry her ? Why on earth not ?"

"I'm married already."

Sugden opened his mouth as if to say something, but the words did not come. He resumed his march up and

down the room. When he did speak again it was in a somewhat milder voice.

“It’s a pity you didn’t think of that before,” he said, drily. He pulled at his beard. “It’s much if you haven’t ruined the girl’s life,” he added in husky tones. “How am I to tell her of this? And I liked you, Henderson. Man! Why did you do it—why didn’t you tell us before?”

Henderson gave a short laugh. “I don’t know that I’m particularly proud of it,” he said. “She’s been the curse of my life for the last four years. Some day she’ll drink herself to death—if the Fates are kind.”

There was a long silence. Sugden broke it at last.

“When’s Barnard coming back?”

“I’m going to-morrow,” the other replied. “When this inquest’s over I’m off to New Zealand. You needn’t be afraid of seeing me about here again. And, look here, Sugden, I’m sorry it happened. I got a bit out of hand—that’s the cold truth.”

They stayed talking for some little time before Sugden left the house. He walked homewards slowly, muttering to himself and occasionally blowing his nose with great vehemence.

“Poor little Evy!” he muttered from time to time. As he turned up the Rectory drive he sighed aloud, and added, “Poor fellow! I’m half sorry for him too. And an hour ago I was ready to knock him down. It’s a queer world, and we must just get over it as best we can.” The resolute optimist made shift to smile, rather sadly.

CHAPTER VII

TO Edward John Sugden, known familiarly among his friends and in the bosom of his family as Jack, very little information came as to the events at Stourton which we have just described. The Sugdens were never great hands at epistolary correspondence : they were a strenuous and withal a rather unmethodical race, who found a great deal of work ready to their hands and did not waste too much time in talking about it, by letter or otherwise. Evelyn was deputed in general to communicate necessary information to her brother, and Evelyn had been more than commonly reticent of late. Of Henderson she had said but the few words already quoted, nor had much supplementary description come from any other member of the family. When that much-discussed gentleman came first to Stourton, Jack Sugden's attention was occupied with other and more important matters ; he was concerned with full courses and time tests and the importance of driving it through with the legs : in a word, he was sojourning at Putney with the Cambridge crew, labouring daily under the keen eye of numerous tideway critics, and listening to much solid and useful advice from the gentleman behind

the megaphone on board a vicious little steam launch. The preparation for a boat-race is arduous and absorbing work, and the rival crews, in the best of health and spirits, are apt to regard life in general as a mere adjunct to the art and practice of rowing. Jack himself, one of the stoutest pluggers who ever helped a crew to victory, was acutely conscious at this time of certain faults in his swing that needed correction, and, for the moment, ceased to take much interest in the quiet life of the family at Stourton.

Nor did he return home for the Easter vacation that year, which was unusual, if the motive was praiseworthy. Next term saw him in for the Mathematical Tripos, and it was borne in upon him suddenly that he was in no condition to pass through that ordeal with any marked success. So when young Girdlestone, who was a scholar of the college as well as Sugden's greatest friend, asked him to go home with him and put in a month's solid reading before the May term began, he assented very readily, for several reasons, mindful among other matters of a very pleasant fortnight he had put in there the last Long. And the month's reading, solid or not, apparently produced a certain effect, for in spite of the May races and his strenuous efforts therein, whereby the St. Michael's boat went up three places, finishing fourth on the river, his name appeared in the list hung upon the rails of the Senate House, sufficiently far from the bottom to escape remark.

The Bar, it had been arranged, was to be Jack Sugden's avenue to fame and fortune. A year ago this had been settled between himself and his father ; a

journey had been made to London, where the two spent a couple of days, very much to their own satisfaction, at a quiet and reasonable hotel, examined the pictures in the Academy, visited the Earl's Court Exhibition, went to a theatre, and paid a somewhat expensive visit to a certain office situated in a dingy court in the Temple. The young man was here duly entered and enrolled as a student-at-law, a member of the Society of the Inner Temple, and no doubt felt at the moment that this honourable position was cheap at the price. Father and son lunched together afterwards, in Bohemian vein, at the "Cock" in Fleet Street, and spent the afternoon agreeably enough watching a cricket match at the Oval. They were excellent friends, these two, and the elder was not one of those who made a point of improving every occasion. He did not fall into the error of wearying his son with excellent advice.

"There, my boy," he said, with his rich laugh, when the business was settled and the money paid over to the treasurer, "I've given you a start and the rest you'll have to do for yourself. I've no fear about your not coming out on top. Men who have rowed for Cambridge always get on, eh? Look at me!" The sturdy clergyman threw out his broad chest and dealt it a resounding blow as he turned into Fleet Street, chuckling merrily.

"Well, if plugging can do it, I'll get somewhere," the son admitted.

He too was of the sanguine order. His equipment in the matter of brains was only moderate, but then he was well aware of the fact, and he had the advantage of being a firm believer in strenuous endeavour.

Periodically, in the meantime, since there were other matters to attend to of more pressing importance, the young man came up to eat his dinners in hall about once a term, and found the early hour of six o'clock, at which these meals were provided, convenient enough for the attending of theatres afterwards, and paid no further attention to the law of the land. Rowing and mathematics were sufficient employment for one man. So engrossed was he, during the May term, with these two pursuits that he found no leisure for the reading of the daily papers—an exercise never very congenial to the great body of undergraduates—and missed altogether the little matter of the Stourton Tragedy. All he heard of it at the time was contained in a letter from his mother, some time after the occurrence had taken place, for Mrs. Sugden had been a good deal occupied since that fatal Monday.

“My dear boy,” she wrote, “we have all been so upset lately that I have had no time to write. Poor old Mr. Smith went mad about a week ago and killed his wife and another woman. The village has talked about nothing else ever since. He is to be tried next week at the Assizes, but your father says there is no fear of his being hanged. They will find him insane, he is sure—he has always been so very queer in the head. Unfortunately Evelyn was in the village when it all took place, and the shock has made her quite ill. We have sent her away for a week or two to her aunt’s at Brighton, and hope the sea air will do her good. She will come back on Thursday fortnight, all being well, as she is very anxious not to miss any of your visit.

You must try and cheer her up when you come."

And when he came down at the end of term, his university career concluded, Evelyn was at home again to welcome him—rather pale, it is true, and perhaps not so ready to laugh and talk as in the old days ; but outwardly very much the same. The girl had been wounded, but she had the courage to hide it. She was a Sugden, and no Sugden was ever given to whimpering. Yet at first it had seemed impossible to go on with the old routine, almost impossible to go on with life at all. She had no thought—not even for a moment—of rebellion, of defiance ; it was not in her nature to question the powers that ruled the world, but the brightness of life was eclipsed ; a black pall overspread the universe ; the men and women she met seemed but shadows moving in the darkness, and herself a shadow moving among them. It was ordered so : thus it would have to be.

In the future, for all things are possible to the Almighty, the cloud might lift again. Yet to her it could not seem possible, as yet. She could constrain herself to wait patiently, to endure, but surely all happiness was dead for her evermore. The world talked of time and its power to heal, but what did the world know of the heights to which she had been raised, of the depths to which she had fallen ? For when the young are miserable, they are very acutely miserable indeed : they have no experience to guide them : they have not learned the wonderful recuperative powers of mankind. And a first love—it is something fresher, purer, more

divine than any emotion of later life. Perhaps the soul feels instinctively that it can never be re-captured in all its pristine glory. There may be imitations, passable enough in their way : never again life seen through the radiance of a first love. How few indeed, thought this initiate of a day, could ever guess at the depth of emotion of which the human heart is capable ! Already (so swift is the passion to flower) she thought it all but incredible that any, even among the heroines of history, could have loved as fervently as herself.

And how short, how pitifully short, had been the duration of her happiness ! For one day she had dreamed ; for one single night she had lain between sleep and wakefulness, bathed in happy memories. And then the overthrow. In a flash it had come upon her at full tide—in that one moment when she felt his arms close round her and his kisses upon her lips. Before that had been doubt, uncertainty, nervousness, embarrassment ; and behold ! at a touch they had fled and were no more. It was a miracle. In that one moment she had become his, she had surrendered her individuality, she was a part of him, whether he chose to take her or no. And alas ! fate had ordained that they must be separated. Yet not even fate itself could rob her of the past. The girl cherished the memory of that poor minute with infinite tenderness. That at least was hers for all eternity.

It is possible that some girls, of more spirit and less sentiment, would have felt a flush of anger against one who had so basely deceived them—a fierce storm of rage that would speedily have obliterated any trace of the softer passion and left them tolerably free from any grief

other than resentment and a thirst for revenge. But there are fortunately many varieties of the genus woman, and Evelyn Sugden was very far indeed from seeking comfort in vindictiveness. That lay nowhere in her gentle nature. It did not cross her mind to reproach Henderson for his action. He had loved her : she had loved him ; and now both were being punished for their offence. For if it was wrong for him to kiss her, being already a married man, had she not also sinned in many ways most deserving of punishment—in thinking about him secretly, sometimes even in church, and in hiding her real thoughts from her father and mother ? The punishment was hard, but it was just, as are all punishments dealt from above. It was her duty to bear it. And perhaps, some day, God might relent.

Dimly and imperfectly expressed, these are in substance the thoughts to which the girl's mind came, after the first wild imaginings had passed away. For she was by nature religious ; religion had been instilled into her from her youth upwards ; to her it was a firm rock of support and she clung to it instinctively at the first real shock she encountered. She was glad now that she had confessed to her mother before it was too late : this had eased her mind of a burden that would have been insupportable if she had been compelled to bear it in secret ; she had done the right thing, late as it was, and so in a sense made her peace with Heaven.

For the rest, she was his—his only, for ever and ever, come what might. She would wait patiently, and perhaps in time—— But there arose scruples, which the little saint—a saint now more than ever—must argue her

way through with feminine casuistry as far as might be, or, better, leave them in other hands. For if she waited, the thought came insistently that happiness could come to her by only one road, and that the death of—the other woman. A terrible thought, as it were constructive murder, a thought that made the poor child recoil suddenly, as from the edge of a dreadful precipice. Was there then to be no hope for her at all? This, too, must be left to a Higher Power. Resignation must be her lot—resignation to the Divine Will. Even in this there lay a crumb of comfort, rightly understood. There is much virtue in resignation: that way are discoverable martyrdom, the crucifixion of the spirit, and other phases of religious exaltation not wholly unpleasing to some. As the more material-minded of us can sometimes find a subtle pleasure in melancholy (born of reflection or what you will) so can the earnest discover the hidden gratification involved in self-denial. And Evelyn Sugden, left broken-hearted (as she fondly imagined) at the early age of eighteen, foresaw with a dim religious joy a long life devoted to good works, to prayer, to self-abnegation, to religious exercises. Unless—unless something were to happen that must be sternly banished from her mind.

Staying with her aunt at Brighton—a maiden aunt well advanced in years—she thought these matters out more or less to her satisfaction, and behaved so much like an angel newly descended from heaven in all its unrivalled purity that she fairly won the heart of that excellent lady, who wrote to Mrs. Sugden a letter full of enthusiastic praise of so much piety, such good

feeling, such rare devotion to lofty ideals and, in fine, so charming a character. Her mother read it with a smile, a sigh, and a few secret tears ; her father, of course, saw the epistle subsequently, annexed it, and keeps it in his drawer to this day together with a certain private communication from Jack's headmaster when that so exemplary character left school for the university. On the whole, he had reason to be proud of his family.

“It is well the boy's coming back,” he said to his wife, after reflecting over his sister's eulogium. “Mary's a good sort, but—well ! I don't want the girl to get moped. Jack will cheer her up a bit. She's young, with the best part of her life before her. We can't have her going into a convent—even a strictly Protestant convent.” The humorist patted his wife on the shoulder. “She takes after you, my dear—but I don't want the wings to sprout too early.”

And Jack came home, as I have said above, and received private instructions, of a guarded nature, from his father—namely, that Evy wanted brightening up after the shock she had experienced, and that it would be wise to mention nothing to her in conversation that might recall that sad affair of poor Smith's. Of Henderson, naturally, nothing was said to him at all ; he did not discover that story for several years to come. So Jack, being one of the most amiable of brothers, insisted upon her accompanying him everywhere, and drove her out himself to the garden-parties of the neighbourhood, and had friends over to the Rectory for lunch and tennis afterwards (rolling and mowing

the court himself with immense energy in the early mornings), and actually organised a picnic with some chosen spirits from the other side of Fleckney, which duly came off in quite tolerable weather and earned him no small reputation as a successful entertainer. For Jack was popular, and a celebrity—was he not in the Cambridge crew?—and the young men of the district envied and admired him. From the social point of view, that summer proved by a long way the most brilliant in the annals of Stourton and its environs. Towards the end, I am not sure that Evelyn did not almost forget, once or twice, that it was all a mockery and a mortification of the flesh.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was an evening in late autumn, and father and son were sitting together in the study at Stourton Rectory. The room, somewhat bare in the daytime, looked snug enough now with a lamp on the table, a fire burning merrily in the hearth, and the red curtains drawn across the window. Jack Sugden reclined comfortably in an easy chair, his slippers feet resting against the stone support of the mantelpiece. A pipe was in his mouth ; a cup of coffee by his side. He was pleasantly tired after a very fair day's shooting. His father, on the other hand, sat at his table wrestling vigorously with a mass of figures, now and again throwing out a remark upon things in general. All day he had been running to and fro in the parish, arranging many things, for there was to be a concert in the village schoolroom the next night in aid of the local cricket club. Now he was making up the Diocesan accounts—a branch of his many labours that afforded him less pleasure than most, for, to tell the truth, the good man was no adept at dealing with figures. None the less, he attacked the work from time to time with his customary energy, and worried through

somehow. Sheer energy had carried him through worse troubles than the making up of a balance-sheet.

“Soon I will be with you, my boy,” he intoned lustily in his bass voice. “I’m wrestlin’ with it. Piles of money coming in—a murrain on it—none for you and me.”

He ran his hands through his curly side-locks, stretched himself, and bent again to his task.

“It’s good to see you working,” said his junior. “So restful after going through the *Tripos*!”

“Aha! I’ll turn you on to it if you jeer. Where’s the good of keeping a tame mathematician if you don’t use him? But belay there! Avaunt! I’ll have done in five minutes.”

Silence fell again upon the little room for the space of one minute and a half. The clergyman was never good at refraining from conversation. He burst out again.

“Look at this now. Here’s old Venables down for three pound five, and I never entered him in the receipt-book. Blessed if I think he ever sent the money, the old ruffian. Jack, my boy, when they tell you clergymen are good men of business, don’t you believe ‘em. Faith! I’m bad enough myself, and I’m better than most. No; we’ve no heads for it, and that’s the solid truth—the cold truth, as Henderson used to say. But hush! my tongue bewrayeth me. You knew him not.”

“Henderson? Oh, yes, I’ve heard of him, I fancy. Wasn’t he the man who arrested old Smith? Timson told me about it the other day. He’s awful taken with him, is Timson. What sort was he, really?”

Sugden ran his eye critically down a line of figures.

"Henderson? H'm—rather mixed, I fancy. Good in parts, like the curate's egg. He's gone now, anyway. *De absentibus non curat lex*, or is it *nil nisi bonum*? I forget. But wait while I get at old Venables."

Silence resumed her sway once more.

"Look here, father, drop it," said the sympathetic son after a long pause. "Come and smoke and have a talk. You've too much to do. Let the diocese wait for its beastly accounts."

Sugden arose, stretched himself, and reached for a pipe. He smiled down at his stalwart boy. The two spoke together with the utmost freedom, which was very far from breeding disrespect. Jack, like the rest of the family, admired his father with a simple sincerity that was very pleasing. He had been his companion as soon as he was old enough to talk reasonably, his assistant since he first learned to add up a row of figures. Consequently they were friends, with a closer friendship than falls to the lot of most in their relative position. I do not suggest that all fathers would be wise to attempt establishing the same sort of footing with their boys. It might not work satisfactorily in all cases. But when it does work satisfactorily, it is indubitably a pleasant relationship—for both parties.

"Well, it gets late," assented the elder, lighting his pipe, "and it's as near done as makes no matter. I'm to take that chair, am I? Good!" He settled himself comfortably. "Too much work, is it? Not a bit of it. If we didn't work we wouldn't enjoy a quiet hour in the evening, like this. That's the Socratic view."

“It’s pretty true, too. I begin to feel it myself. It’s time I took myself off to London and began work again. I’m getting lazy here.” The young man kicked the fender reflectively. “I want to be making some money. It’s a long job—getting called, and all that.”

He stared at the fire, his forehead corrugated with wrinkles.

“That’s so. But there’s no great hurry just now. Go up after Christmas, and start fair with the new year. You deserve a bit of a holiday, and it’s good for us having you at home for a while. Evy’s picked up wonderfully since you came back. I was getting anxious about her—or your mother was—which comes to much the same thing.”

He paused to contemplate a singularly successful ring of smoke. This was the pleasantest hour of the day to Frank Sugden.

Jack did not immediately reply. He seemed just a little embarrassed, and when he spoke again there was the suspicion of a blush on his manly cheek.

“Father,” he said suddenly, rather with the air of a rider who has made up his mind to go for an awkward fence, “do you mind telling me how we are off for money?” He cleared his throat. “I mean,” he explained hastily, “can you manage all right, you know, and that sort of thing? I don’t want to be a burden on you, living up in London and the rest of it.”

The father rubbed his nose with the end of his pipe, smiling.

“How are we? Oh, we’re tolerable, you know. We scrat’ along, as they say in the village. We keep

scratting. That's all right, my boy ; you needn't worry about money just yet. Old Hirst's a good tenant, and as long as he pays up regularly we can manage. Do you want any cash just now ? ”

“ Oh, no ! I paid up all my little bills.” He paused. “ They don't think much of Hirst in the village,” he continued. “ Old Hardy was saying he was the worst farmer in the neighbourhood.”

“ Old Hardy ? Well, you know old Hardy—he's the biggest grumbler unhung. No ; I don't think Hirst's so bad, and as I say, he pays up like a Briton. But I'll tell you just how we stand, if you like. I don't believe in keeping things dark. Hirst has the glebe—that's four hundred ; the quarries pay about another hundred in royalties for the bit they work. About a hundred settled on your mother when we married—descends to the children afterwards. We wax fat on six hundred a year. When we're all dead you'll have just the hundred to help you along, my boy. But by that time you may be making your thousands.”

“ I think I see them coming.” He stood up and turned his back to the ruddy blaze. “ No ; I want to earn a little on my own—just enough to live on myself, you know, without drawing on you. And possibly —” The boy hesitated ; he seemed to be labouring with something that he wished to tell, but found difficult to get out. “ Money's a nuisance,” he concluded. “ I suppose it's necessary to have some.”

Sugden reflected, sunk in deep calculation. “ I had some of my own once,” he said at last. “ D'you remember one Dunkley, a tanner ? No ; he was before

your time. Well, he was a plausible dog, and chronically hard up—a clever fellow, too—a journalist. I used to know him up at Cambridge. He came down here, it must be ten years ago now, when you were at school, with no end of a fine scheme. Wanted capital, that was all. I lent him a thousand—just about all I had of my own: According to him it was bound to pay fifty per cent. in a year or so.” He laughed. The recollection of the lost thousand did not seem to trouble him much. “I’m afraid we’ll never see a penny back of that lot,” he resumed. “It might have been useful to you—but perhaps you’ll be better without it. Nothing like wholesome poverty for work—poverty and an early marriage.”

Jack recovered his animation suddenly.

“That’s so,” he said briskly. “I believe in poverty down to the ground. And there was somebody who said once that it was the best thing possible for a barrister to start with—marrying for love, didn’t he? But I suppose you must have something to marry on. You can’t start on nothing; it wouldn’t be fair.” He spoke with a show of judicial severity. “I suppose he really meant—one might get engaged.”

It was noticeable that the youthful face was getting distinctly redder.

Sugden was still apparently immersed in abstruse mathematics.

“I’ll allow you a hundred and fifty,” he announced at last. “You ought to be able to manage on that, I fancy. I wish I could make it more, but money runs away like water in a big parish.”

Jack's ingenuous countenance became irradiated with simple joy. "Father, you're a first-class trump!" he exclaimed. "Do you—do you really think it's enough?"

The surprised father could only eye his son in blank astonishment, for he had not quite followed the swift process of deduction that had been taking place in his mind.

"Enough?" he echoed feebly. "Well, I suppose so. What for?"

"To—to get engaged on," with a rather shamefaced air.

"Engaged!" Sugden gasped for a moment, so suddenly did the shock come. And then the humour of it caught him with equal suddenness, and he lay back in his chair and laughed until the tears came. Jack flushed a deep crimson.

"Please don't," he begged. "I mean—please stop laughing, father. I thought that was what you meant."

He took up the poker and prodded viciously at the coals in the fireplace, visibly disconcerted. Sugden pulled himself up with a gallant effort.

"Jack, you'll be the death of me," he gasped, struggling to compose his voice. "I'm sorry, my boy—I couldn't 'elp but laugh, as they say in the village. But look here, you don't mean it, do you? You're not dead serious, I trust." He grew graver. "I mean to say, old boy, it's rather quick work—before you start at all. It might hamper you, you know. Seriously, I shouldn't think of it just yet."

Still a little flushed, the new-made graduate explained, in perfect seriousness, that he had no thought of marrying immediately. "It was only just an idea I had," he went on, rather lamely. "I thought—well, you know, there's never any knowing what might happen." He turned to his father with one of his frank smiles. "And—I did meet rather a nice girl the other day," he added. His brow clouded again, and he sighed. "Don't you think it—it keeps a man straight to get engaged young?"

Sugden looked at his hopeful son with a quizzical appreciation. And so the boy, too, had caught the subtle infection. Things of this kind never came singly, he reflected. He smoked awhile in silence, pulling now and again at his beard, as he was apt to do in thought. It was absurdly early—and yet— There was Evy, too, with her experience—a warning against the folly of acting upon impulse. Yes; it was ridiculous. The boy had only just come down from Cambridge. Sugden took to gnawing his beard in perplexity, for he was well aware that every clergyman in the diocese, every father in the county, would declare unanimously against the slightest encouragement of such foolishness. On the other hand, that mattered little, in itself. He had always been accustomed to go his own gait; he trusted rather to his own instincts than to the collective wisdom of the county. And his own instincts, his inmost convictions, were all in favour of putting no obstacles in the path of love. Had not he himself married for love, and with little enough to live on, and was he to deny to his own son the right to do the same?

He leaned forward, knocked his pipe out against a smouldering coal, and placed it carefully on the mantelpiece. Then he stood up and delivered himself of a serious oration.

“Love,” he began, “if it is real love and not a mere imitation, is a sacred thing, and I would be the last man in the world to meddle with it. I married for love myself, and I thank God for it every day of my life. I was young, and so was your mother, Jack, and it’s true enough we hadn’t much money to begin with. But I was older than you by some five years, and five years means a lot when it’s in the twenties. Now I know you pretty well, and I think you’ve got a decent head on your shoulders. But you may be mistaken. And supposing you are, you can see what it would mean to make a mistake now. It might ruin your whole life. I should say ‘wait and see how you feel about the girl in a year’s time, or more.’ That is, if you have the least suspicion or doubt about the matter.”

He paused for a moment. Jack looked up quickly, with a smile, and shook his head.

“I have none whatever,” he said. “Not since the moment I saw her first.”

The parson pursued his sermon. “As you know pretty well,” he went on, “I don’t lay much stress on money, or birth. But they make a difference, of sorts. They have to be considered. If you marry any one beneath you in station, little things are apt to crop up afterwards—things you don’t see just at first—and jar upon you. Mind you, they do that in most cases without any difference in station, and if you are not man

enough to crush them down and take them smiling, there'll be trouble—and that's why so many marriages are unhappy. I've joined together too many people in this parish not to know something about it. But that's another thing. As to getting engaged helping you in your work and keeping you straight—well ! my boy, I've very little fear of your going wrong that way. Still, once more, if you are sure of yourself about the girl, and you say you are, I have enough confidence in you to say 'Exercise your own judgment.' " His eye twinkled for a moment. " I suppose I'm an old fool to say it—at any rate all my reverend brethren would call me one—but I believe in you, Jack. Think it over, and if you find you must speak out, do so. That's all, and good luck to you."

Jack sprung up and took his father's hand and wrung it warmly. " By George ! I don't believe there's another man like you in the world, father. And by Jove ! I've told you nothing about her at all yet—not even her name—and I can't tell you yet because—because it may all come to nothing. But she's the dearest, sweetest little girl on earth." He held up his head and spoke with a fine enthusiasm. " And you'll see her some day, if I have any luck, and you'll agree with me. Father, you're a brick." His voice faltered a little, and there was a suspicion of moisture about the eyes as he came to an abrupt conclusion. Sugden himself was not without emotion. He blew a sounding blast on his nose and cleared his throat.

" God bless you, my boy," he said gravely. " And you'll be straightforward, I know, in any case. There'll

be no secret engagement, I mean : it'll be all open and above-board. There, Jack, it's time for bed, old boy. Good-night ! ”

For a few minutes he sat in front of the fire after the door had closed, meditating, with now and then a smile curving his lips beneath their healthy crop of hair. He was a good boy, was Jack : he had no great fear for his future. He had sense enough to make a tolerably good choice, too : at any rate that could not be helped now. But it was funny both the children taking it so soon, and so close together. Poor Evy ! hers had been a sad experience. Well ! it was over, and she would get better in time, and the right man would turn up in the end, and all would be well. Things generally came straight at the finish, reflected this incurable optimist. “God's in His heaven ” : if we do but place our faith in Him, He can turn even our misfortunes to good account. So ran his simple creed.

CHAPTER IX

THE remarkable family with whose fortunes we are chiefly concerned at present were in the habit of pursuing their own path through the thorny maze of life without paying any very great attention to the divers opinions of well-intentioned neighbours. The Sugdens knew everybody, it was true : they were not unpopular : it was not easy for any one to bear a grudge against the busy clergyman, unless on the score of his manifold activities, and it was impossible not to have a liking for the sweet and gracious lady who assisted him in his never-ceasing labours. But the two had not many intimates. Perhaps they lived rather too much in a world of their own ; the strong affection that subsisted between all the members of the family was sufficient for them : it satisfied their social instincts and left them careless of forming other ties. Yet Sugden, for his part, was friendly enough with all the world, from the county magnates down to the small tradesmen who made up the Fleckney Board of Guardians. All had a kindness for the man ; all recognised his sterling worth, his never-failing good-humour, his immense capacity for work. Yet somehow the majority hardly appreciated him at his

true value. A clerical neighbourhood in the country is too often peopled with men fossilized in dull tradition—men whose minds are narrow to a degree almost inconceivable—men who are prone to look askance at anything which they cannot understand. And originality in any form is one of the many matters outside their comprehension. Jogging along comfortably in their own well-worn ruts, it cannot but be an offence to them to behold a rider ranging freely over hedges and ditches, making straight for his goal without consideration of persons or conventions. “You never can be sure what Sugden will say,” was the constant complaint of brother clergymen at meetings and congresses—as though a man who would not produce the correct form of words mechanically at the pull of the trigger was something dangerous to Church and State.

Whilst all were agreed that Mrs. Sugden was an amiable and charming woman, there were objections raised against her also. “You never seem to get any further with Mrs. Sugden,” was the common saying among the ladies of the neighbourhood. It was hinted that she was always busy, that she never had any time to spare, that she was too much wrapped up in her children—as some were fond of expressing it. Perhaps the real truth was, that the wife of the Rector of Stourton had no love for the retailing of gossip. She was not an adept at the little malicious touches, the sidelong pin-pricks of personal criticism, that enlivened the tea-tables at most of the surrounding rectories or vicarages. It was not in her nature to say unkindly things of any one : it made her uncomfortable when other people retailed them in

her presence. And possibly in consequence of this there were some who felt a sense of constraint in her society. Miss Weston, of Willoughby, noted through the county as the possessor of a caustic tongue, spoke of her openly as "a dear thing, but a dreadful wet-blanket. I always have to be on my best behaviour when Mrs. Sugden is about," added the sprightly lady, "and as for that girl of hers I can't stand her at any price. She puts me in mind of a stained-glass window. Since that *locum tenens* of theirs went, she's been worse than ever."

And if any one in the company chanced to inquire after the reason, Fanny Weston was always ready to enlighten her—I need not say that these were purely feminine conclaves—with a full and particular account of the whole affair.

"What! You don't mean to say you've never heard about it?" she would exclaim. "My dear, the girl fell in love with him and positively drove him away. She ran after him all day until the poor man had no peace. They say in Stourton"—sinking her voice to a confidential murmur—"that she actually kissed him in the street. Of course, you know, I don't exactly believe it, but you can take my word for it that there was something. There must be. No smoke without fire, you know. That's what comes of bringing up a girl like that—without ever letting her see anybody." And the sharp-tongued lady would laugh merrily at the follies of these poor people. She did not speak exactly from ill-nature. She believed the story implicitly; was it not the common talk of all the old women at Willoughby, who had it from certain Stourton friends? She had studiously refrained from

embroidering it ; she had barely done more than add an occasional adjective.

The Sugdens themselves naturally were not favoured with these remarks, nor did any one care to report them to the peaceful household at Stourton. Not even Jack, who went about a good deal during that summer and autumn, heard so much as a whisper affecting the fair fame of his sister. For to do them justice, the men left this kind of conversation strictly to the matrons and old maids, who in their turn reverted to less personal topics when the drawing-room chanced to be darkened by the presence of a black coat. Let us not judge them harshly. Life in the country, where society happens to be almost entirely restricted to the clerical element, is apt to be something of a dull business for those of the more frivolous sex. Their amusements are not many : week after week sees the same monotonous round of choir practice and parochial visiting ; they are perhaps hardly to be blamed if they discover a tendency to relapse upon gossip. The pity is that in so many cases they can find nothing to gossip about but the little failings of their neighbours.

To obtain a reputation for wisdom or eloquence is a sufficiently simple matter in the provinces, but it is even easier to acquire a name for eccentricity. Sugden himself, though a Rural Dean, and admittedly a useful man in the diocese, was too humorous by nature to escape the appellation, and every trifling incident at all out of the common served to crystallise the received opinion, which now began to embrace the family in general. "What a pity they should have such extraordinary

ideas!" prattled in unison ladies from afar who were disposed to like Mrs. Sugden and her pretty daughter until they heard the terrible indictment of eccentricity, backed by this last story of an unrequited love. In such a district it is undeniably eccentric to be but one degree removed from the commonplace. And I am not denying that the family had a way of looking upon things somewhat different from the ordinary. They did not first ask themselves, when any question arose for settlement, what would be the opinion of their acquaintances upon that point, and proceed to act in accordance therewith. They had at least the merit of knowing their own minds, and of caring singularly little about the appearance their action might present to the minds of others. A virtue so uncommon almost deserves—it all but invariably receives—the reprobation of all who are accustomed to walk circumspectly, scanning for guidance the faces of a hundred sneering bystanders.

The simpler our philosophy in this world, the greater is our chance of happiness. Thus may we see a clear path, and pursue it steadfastly, slashing through the trifling obstacles that too often daunt the more subtle mind. For he examines too closely; he takes a magnifying glass to his difficulties; and the ditch yawns before him, a river well-nigh impassable; the thorn-bush bristles, a formidable zariba. Sugden and his school—our school if we are wise—take a wide view, an eagle's glance at the surrounding country, mark their goal afar off, take bearings, and plod diligently towards it, regardless of advice or expostulation. "For what am I placed here?" we may conceive the man asking of himself, and

the answer ran, “As far as in me lies, to do good ; to civilise this little section of the universe, to be a healthy influence rather than an unhealthy ; in fine, to promote the sum of human happiness, first in my family, secondly in my parish, thirdly, among as many outsiders as I can reach.” As to the controversial matters that rage among militant churchmen, he steadily declined to take part in them: to his mind they were mere stumbling blocks, inventions of the devil. “It is our business to work together for the common good ; quarrelling about details is not only waste of time, but gives occasion to the enemy to blaspheme.”

For the rest, reverence demanded, in his eyes, a certain amount of ritual. But he was no bigot. “If I found,” he is reported to have said at a conference, “that my parishioners could worship more readily beholding me in vestments, I would wear as many as your Lordship permits, short of actual suffocation : if they expressed a wish to hear me preach in a black gown, I would do so, even though I should have to buy a new one. The main thing surely is to get our people to church and to keep them there.” At which you may imagine how the little band of clean-shaven ritualists looked at each other with smiles and scornful shrugs.

His wife—and this was surely a striking instance of her devotion—shared his opinions and braved the opinion of her neighbours with equal fortitude. Indeed, if there were more wives like Mrs. Sugden, there would be less halting and timidity of action on the part of their husbands. His tenets were her own : she mirrored them with simple fidelity : if he thought so, that was sufficient.

She seldom even suggested difficulties ; she never hinted at the possibility of outside condemnation. How many women could have resisted the temptation to say, in effect, "I told you so," after that Henderson fiasco ? She had never liked the man ; she had (which was uncommon enough for her) expressed doubts as to the wisdom of making a friend of him so early ; but since the catastrophe she had not so much as mentioned his name. And now, when on the top of this came the fresh news, she had no thought for a moment of questioning her husband's judgment.

"What would you have said, my love ?" he asked. "I told him to do as he liked. We can trust Jack, I think. He seems to have got the disease quite badly—almost as badly as his father did."

"I should have done the same, dear," was her reply. "But oh ! I do hope she is a nice girl."

"Well ! he can afford to wait a bit," his father reflected. "He shall go up to London and get started. I shall ask him to give it half a year's thought, if he can manage it. There's nothing definite, of course. But I know Jack pretty well. I don't think he's the sort to change in a hurry. And I do not believe in human interference in these matters. Do you ?"

Mrs. Sugden smiled and sighed. "He is very young." "So I told him," went on the cheerful man, unabashed. "There he is, the ruffian ! I hear him outside. Come in, Jack," he bellowed in his deep voice. Jack entered and stood by the door, holding the handle. He guessed what had been taking place, and his ruddy countenance shone like the setting sun in autumn.

“I’ve been telling your mother what you said last night. She thinks you’re a scoundrel of the deepest dye—but she’ll forgive you this once, if you go and kiss her, immejut.” He laughed in high good-humour.

Jack went up quietly and kissed his mother on the forehead.

“You will wait a little, dear ?” she said tenderly.

“We think you had better go up to town and make a start,” said his father. “Take half a year to think it over before you do anything rash—if you can manage it. What of that, eh ?”

His son shuffled rather uneasily with his feet. “The Girdlestones have asked me to put in a week there at Christmas,” he said, after some little hesitation.

Sugden burst into a peal of hearty laughter. “He’s given it away,” he cried ; “given it clean away. Jack, Jack, you will never make a diplomatist. So now we know all about it, eh ? It was at the Girdlestones, was it ? Come now, make a clean breast of it.”

“I never said so,” his son protested guardedly. But events were too much for him, and he joined in the laugh himself. “Well ! then, if you must have it, there it is. Father, I knew you’d get it out of me sooner or later. It had to come : you’d never have let me out of the house without getting the name.”

“Ay, ah ken fine ah’m juist the maist cur-ious of men.” It was always a sign of high spirits with Sugden when he relapsed into dialect.

“What is her name, dear ?” asked his mother, in her placid voice.

“I didn’t want to say anything about it till—well !

till it was all over, mother. But there ! I hate secrets, and I believe I should have had to tell you soon, anyway. Yes ; it's Miss Girdlestone—Kitty her name is." He heaved a deep breath and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "It makes me hot all over to talk about it," he apologised. "Because—you know—supposing it all comes to nothing ! I shall look an awful fool, sha'n't I ? Well ! never mind—only you mustn't tell any one else about it."

"And you are going there at Christmas ?" said the anxious mother. "Can't you put it off a little longer, dear ?" Looking at the stalwart figure of her son, she could only imagine one possible result of that expedition. No girl upon earth, she was convinced, could find it in her heart to refuse Jack Sugden.

"I must," asserted the young lover, with calm conviction. "I said I would go. I can't very well put them off, can I ? Besides—oh, hang it, mother, I shall never sleep till I've got it over."

"Poor boy !" She stroked his hand gently. The elder Sugden did not attempt to control his merriment. He had the most infectious laugh in the world.

CHAPTER X

BEHOLD now Jack Sugden, bachelor in arts of the University of Cambridge, sometime five in the crew of that celebrated institution, impelled by the strong arm of Love—an arrow let loose from the bow—in the direction of the Girdlestones' house. Twenty-one years of age ; a clear field before him ; about to visit the girl of whom he had been dreaming the best part of a year. It was not surprising that the world seemed very fresh to him that bright December day.

What had made him fall in love with Kitty Girdlestone ? What makes any man fall in love with any woman ? I do not know that you or I, paying a visit to Ralston Manor, half a mile or so from the little village of Ralston, Essex, would have picked out that one of the three sisters who brightened the Girdlestone household, on the score of beauty, or cleverness, or an engaging demeanour. Truth to tell, she was not one of those girls who arrest general attention at first sight. Friends of the family—perhaps even certain members of the family—were wont rather to pity her, as being so obviously overshadowed by the two elder sisters. These were fine, tall, handsome, healthy girls : she was pale,

fragile, delicate, retiring. At a first visit she would very likely escape notice altogether.

It had not been so with Sugden, at any rate. Perhaps these things are predestined—sometimes ; perhaps there was that in his eyes which enabled him to see what was denied to others. Or again (and this is the most likely solution) he may have been first attracted by just that lack of general attention that the youngest daughter of the house appeared to receive. It was characteristic of all the Sugdens to come to the rescue of the neglected, to succour the weak, to do their best to redress the balance of human happiness. He turned naturally to the Cinderella of the family, and discovered in her new beauties day by day. To discover beauties in such a character was as simple to him as finding wild flowers to the naturalist : he had but to look for them and they sprang up at every turn.

And the girl was grateful. With him her shyness melted away by degrees : she grew visibly beneath the unaccustomed sunshine. It seemed as though she had been waiting for this—for some touch of notice, some hint of admiration. She had always been frail, but she was healthier now than she had been. There was even a touch of colour in her cheeks. She drank in, as it were, something of Sugden's own overflowing vitality : his presence breathed new life into her : she began to take a part in life, to see bright possibilities in the shifting kaleidoscope of events ; she was no longer a mere pallid spectator, unnoticed and not greatly interested : she was herself stepping forward to the footlights, flushed with the first consciousness of power, a protagonist.

Something told her now that this time the expected would happen. Some indefinable telepathetic communication infected her with a touch of his own excitement : her nerves quivered in sympathy as he drew nearer. She felt it difficult to keep quiet ; and why should she keep quiet ? The thought of him inspired action and health and exercise. She went out with the others, for it was a fine frosty morning, and the ice was bearing down in the flooded meadows. They skated, and the groom brought down a hamper of food to the merry party at one o'clock, and they ate and drank, made ravenous by the keen air, and went on skating again, and trooped back together in the afternoon to tea, feeling that they had spent a profitable day.

Is it not the pleasantest thing in the world to come home on a wintry afternoon, darkness just coming on, and find a cheerful fire burning on the hearth, and sink into a chair, sufficiently tired to appreciate the luxury of a rest, while the tea-things are brought in, and the plate of muffins or buttered toast set down to keep warm by the fire ? If not the pleasantest, it is certainly one of the pleasantest. And Jack was coming down, by the five o'clock train. To herself she called him already by that name. For she knew—she could not help knowing—although the rest of the family had probably never thought of the matter at all. In her own heart she was as certain of the ultimate result as of the ordered sequence of day and night. A miracle might happen, but his heart was in her keeping. And she knew his nature ; she could not imagine that he would ever change. Sooner or later it would come—the supreme moment. And then—

Her busy brain pictured the crucial scene in a hundred different ways, all sufficiently pleasing to contemplate. It gave her a thrill of triumph to reflect that it was for her alone that he was coming. Her influence was drawing him all those many miles in that cold weather. She wondered of what he was thinking as he rattled along in the train, which by now should be well past Colchester. Was he thinking of her all the time? was he as excited as she felt herself to be? was he planning it all to himself as she had been planning it just now? And did he find the same sort of half-timorous delight in it? Probably not; he was a man and she could not imagine him nervous. With her to think of that moment sometimes oppressed her with a real physical weakness: she felt a constriction of the throat, a dizziness of the brain: she began to doubt whether her nerves would be equal to standing the strain when it actually came. It would be ridiculous to faint, besides being embarrassing for poor Jack, who might never muster up courage to speak a second time. This last thought was one of those that spring up suddenly unbidden from some unknown source, to be repudiated immediately with stern contempt.

Kitty Girdlestone was by temperament a dreamer. She had perhaps too vivid and lively an imagination—which is often enough the compensating gift to Cinderella. She had dreamed her life through of fairy princes: she kept a diary in which she recorded her inmost thoughts, or nearly, with a sort of fearful daring, writing them down at night-time, alone in her own room, and locking up the book carefully afterwards. It was a kind of devotional exercise—or let us say half-

devotional, half-literary. For she was not insensible to the charms of self-expression. She read poetry with avidity ; she had attempted the form herself ; she had her dreams in this direction also. For was she not one of the great army of the Misunderstood, to whom literature has ever been the chosen refuge ? Of those who write, how many have not had to force a passage in this direction through finding other means of expression closed to them ! They have, or imagine that they have, high thoughts and aspirations incomprehensible by those around them ; they rush into print in the hope of finding at least some kindred spirit that can understand. Thus do the overshadowed sometimes burst through the ring of encompassing darkness and emerge into the sudden light of fame—a startling change that may test their characters somewhat too severely.

To temperaments of this kind reading is the natural solace in the mean while. The Girdlestones had a library—of the good old-fashioned sort—a library of the customary standard works heavily bound in calf, with here and there, scattered among the upper shelves, a tolerable sprinkling of modern novels, the fruit of the Colonel's occasional expeditions to the various golfing centres of the kingdom. For Colonel Girdlestone, with so many others of his rank (you shall not find many golf-links without a Colonel or two), retiring from the service of his country had turned his still considerable energy into this new channel, and now discharged the duties of secretary and treasurer of the Ralston Golf Club, which implied to his mind a roving commission to examine the methods of all other important clubs. The Ralston

members may have resented his frequent periods of absence, but if so they had the wisdom not to say much about it. For Colonel Girdlestone was a masterful man, and the possessor of as good a vocabulary (for use in bunkers) as any two ordinary players. He ruled his committee as he ruled his family—with a rod of iron.

Kitty was afraid of her father. Her sensitive disposition shrank from his rather coarse nature. But, to do him justice, he treated this delicate flower with a sort of rough kindness. She was permitted to browse unchecked among his books, so long as she kept quiet and did not disturb the autocrat at his work. She would sit in that library for hours, noiseless as a frightened mouse, gathering strange pearls from this remarkable assortment of literature, and secure at least from any interruption from the rest of the household. Their literary food came weekly from the Colchester circulating library, and nobody consulted her taste in the selection. Sometimes she glanced through one of the books, if it happened not to meet with favour from the others. But her mother and sisters regarded these works as their own property ; they took them in turn and read them assiduously in the evenings, when nothing more exciting was forward. Kitty was supposed to have acquired a taste for old-fashioned literature, precluding any possibility of caring to read the latest novel.

The girl had her own little collection upstairs as well —half a dozen little books that she had bought for herself with her own money, and kept locked up in the bureau with her diaries. She read them in strict privacy. They were pretty little volumes, nicely bound and hand-

somely lettered in gold—books of modern verse. For was she not also a poet, *in posse*? She must see how these others worked—what thoughts agitated them, what modes of expression they adopted. You might have discovered among these thin volumes, had you been privileged to look within that jealously-guarded receptacle, a book that had a certain fame in its day—that has perhaps some admirers even now—one of the first published works of a minor poet who attained afterwards to some little celebrity. “Wind-flowers” is the title—the author’s name Theodore March. The love poems in this collection pleased the girl’s fancy wonderfully : they seemed to her to breathe an intensely spiritual sentiment. Some critics had thought differently, but much depends in these matters upon the point of view. And in Theodore March there had always been a touch of the feminine—some would say the effeminate—that appealed strongly to women. It was the suffrages of the ladies that raised him to eminence ; their shillings that induced his publisher to ask for more.

But now the real had come into her life and, temporarily at least, ousted the ideal from pride of place. He was coming ! he would be here in a few minutes ; at any time she might hear the crunch of wheels on the gravel of the drive, and the ring of the front-door bell. Her vivid imagination pictured the arrival ; the noise of the door being thrown open, her father’s loud, cheery voice in the hall welcoming the visitor, a few words of conversation in less audible tones, and then the opening of the drawing-room door followed by an inrush of cool air. He would stand there a moment, looking round,

just a little dazzled by the blaze of light, until his eyes lit upon her. She pictured the half-blush, half-smile on his face. It was all so real to her that she caught her breath : her heart was palpitating.

She had time to pass herself in hasty review before he came. How would he prefer to see her ? You may be sure that she had taken thought of that betimes in the matter of dress. She had kept on her hat and jacket, and the little fur thing that went round her neck, because she knew he would like to see that she had been out ; and, besides, the hat suited her. And she must be a little out of the way, not too close to the fire, hidden rather and apart from the others, so as to quicken his sympathy. The innocent machinations of women, even of the youngest, are innumerable.

And after all (as is not uncommon with persons of a too lively imagination) the real event brought a scene of disappointment. He did not see her soon enough—that was all—but it made a difference. When we plan the future too elaborately, we are the more apt to be disconcerted at the slightest departure from our preconceived arrangements. Was he shy, or only rather dense ? When she went up to her room afterwards to dress for dinner she tapped an angry little foot upon the floor as she stood before the glass taking off her things. And really she had looked quite nice, too—much nicer than she would look in evening dress, especially as she had nothing fit to wear. She sighed and frowned impatiently. He might have paid a little more attention to her. Poor old Jack ! he was always rather stupid. Perhaps that was why she liked him so much. She could never endure

clever men, who talked as though they knew everything and you knew nothing. It flattered her vanity to know that he recognised her superior talents. Had he not often said, "How clever you are!" in wondering admiration, when she had quoted something from her store of learning? In conversation with him alone Kitty would talk in a style very different from that she employed in the bosom of her family. But of what value was cleverness, in a girl?

Her mood softened: the sensitive little creature was compact of varying moods. She looked out of the window at the twinkling stars, and a whole flood of tender sentiment welled up and dominated her soul. She smiled softly at the silver, pallid moon; she felt her eyes fill with unshed tears. What a sublime pathos there was in all things human—in life, in love, in death! Her lips murmured unconsciously a line of poetry—

"O calm, clear night, look on me ere I die,
I have lived and loved—Goodbye!"

They were the concluding lines of one of March's little songs.

"Jack," she whispered to the sighing breeze, "I love you," and sighed again. Why did she love him? she reflected with a half-amused glance backwards at her own folly. Well! because he was big and strong and straightforward, and—and decidedly stupid. She laughed outright, for changing moods chased one another across her mind like ripples on a pond. Yes! and because he was really rather nice-looking sometimes, and because he

loved her. But chiefly perhaps because of that blessed stupidity. How she would play with him to-night!

And Jack Sugden, arraying himself in spotless linen for the occasion in his room at the far end of the passage, was at that moment pluming himself upon the skill and delicacy he had displayed on meeting her in the drawing-room. Had she not once rebuked him last time for never taking his eyes off her? "She will see that I have some tact," thought the simple man. From which pleasing dream he would no doubt be aroused in good time.

CHAPTER XI

FALLING in love is notoriously a simple matter, easy of accomplishment to the most foolish of mankind—the easier, perhaps a cynic would say, in proportion to his folly. The making a formal proposal of marriage, however, is a matter that often affrights the boldest, and covers with confusion the wisest of us all. The hero who has advanced calmly through the bullet-swept zone to face the enemy, the sage who has charmed thousands with his philosophy—is it not the commonplace of novelists to show us these dumb and overwhelmed before some pert schoolgirl, burning to declare themselves but unable to utter a consecutive sentence? And, indeed, it is not the simplest thing in the world to say the right thing on these delicate occasions. Looking at it from afar, in cold blood, one may plan out everything in a sufficiently satisfactory manner, but when it comes to the point of actual speech, when the lover stands actually in the presence of his divinity, he needs to possess nerves of steel or the most phlegmatic of temperaments to play the carefully-rehearsed scene so as to satisfy himself, and his audience. As a matter of fact, the love-scenes that actually take place in this world of makeshifts are commonly

very tame and halting affairs : the speaker, who has made up his mind for weeks before that he will lead up to the crucial point deftly, and propound it with grace and a certain originality, finds himself stumbling about blindly in a maze of words, and (if he has the courage to go forward at all) blurts out some silly formula that he had rejected in his calmer moments as hopelessly inadequate, and is only partially consoled when he finds that it has served his purpose. For we would all like, at this supreme moment, to produce something worthy of the occasion, to get through the scene with flying colours, to be, in short, at our best. And what really happens is so paltry, so unlike what we have so often figured to ourselves, that it sensibly detracts from the pleasure even of the successful lover. How the rejected must feel, conscious that they have presented their case so lamely, it would be unkind to inquire.

The path of the unhappy wooer is not made easier by the fact that he is paying his addresses to a woman—one of a sex notoriously incomprehensible in mind and curiously inconsistent in action. A girl may be well disposed towards a man, may be anxious not to lose him, may even be desperately anxious that he should come to the point—and yet put obstacles in his way at every turn. She will, perhaps, go some way with him readily enough, but when she detects any signs of seriousness she will escape laughing down a side-alley, and leave him cursing the fickleness of woman. It is the natural instinct of the hunted animal ; and let a girl wish to be led captive never so ardently the desire of self-preservation is apt to overmaster her at the critical moment.

Thus many acquire the reputation of a flirt when they are nothing of the kind.

There was not really much of the flirt about Kitty Girdlestone, but she too had no mind to be captured without offering her lover some of the excitement of the chase. She had her own little theories on the subject of courtship, theories acquired in a tolerably wide and catholic course of reading, and she was strongly of opinion that a prize is generally valued in strict proportion to the trouble incurred in winning it. She gave Jack plenty of trouble, but it was not altogether in malice : it was partly because she could not help herself. He was so delightfully straightforward and blundering, his face expressed his sentiments so openly that she could not resist playing with him a little ; and again his dogged persistency almost frightened her. She wished to keep it secret, to enjoy a week or so of pleasantly respectful admiration, and to capitulate at the end just when it suited her to do so. She had a sort of feeling for the dramatic ; and there was danger of an anti-climax if the important scene came on too early in the play.

To put it thus perhaps displays the girl in something of an unamiable light, which is a pity, for she had many excellent qualities. She was sincere in her affection, but she had a touch of the artistic temperament ; she was given to analysing her emotions ; she was rather inclined to stand aloof from herself, and watch, and criticise— all of which tends to artifice and the decay of sincerity. And she wanted to manage this little drama in her own fashion ; would it not be a triumph to guide this colossal blunderer in safety along so tortuous a path ? Triumphs

had been rare enough in her life ; we need hardly blame her if she schemed to make the most of this. At night sometimes she would sit and wonder at herself, after the ladies of the family had gone to bed, not without a touch of remorse that she had deliberately spoiled a favourable opportunity. For suppose—just suppose that her little scheme went astray at the last moment, and he were to go, rebuffed, disheartened, perhaps never to return ! Then she would grow softened and penitent, and make quite other resolutions for the morrow, and blame herself openly for being a little fool, with a mental reservation.

“ I shall do just the same again to-morrow, I know,” she would say to herself, between tears and laughter. “ Unless—unless he happens for once to do just the right thing. And that, I suppose, is impossible.”

Jack Sugden’s mind was harassed by no suspicions of this kind. He was not given in any way to analysis, either of his own emotions or of another’s. Perhaps he felt dimly, as time went on, and he saw his successive efforts foiled, that fortune was against him, but he did not harass himself much by wondering whether his own conduct of the case had been the best possible. He knew his own mind ; he had some grounds for supposing (unless he was very much deceived) that the girl liked him. He could but ask her, and he meant doing it. Hitherto some unfortunate incident had always prevented him, but he was bound to find his opportunity if he only waited long enough. Once or twice already he might have managed it—if he had only been a little quicker. “ I never was very quick,” he thought hopefully, reflecting on what might have been, “ but

steady does it. I'll get there some day." Jack was fortunate in the inheritance of an optimistic disposition, difficult to depress for any length of time. He made a resolve, however, to cut preliminaries next time and come straight to the point. He repeated it undauntedly after each successive failure.

He grew to display a skill and resource that surprised himself in the contriving of opportunities. "I'll dress early for dinner," he would say to himself, "and get down before the rest. She's almost always first down. And by Jove ! I'll not waste any time when I get there." So saying, he would hurry on his clothes and get down to the drawing-room at least half an hour before the Chinese gong in the hall announced dinner. Perhaps she would actually come down before the others, perhaps not, but at the best it was only a conversation of a few minutes, of which every moment threatened an interruption. What can be done in five minutes, with a girl who refuses, for reasons of her own, to take you seriously ? Not much, it must be admitted. But the gallant fellow made heroic efforts. After a week had slipped by, barren of any result, he began to test the enemy's defences so severely that a little luck might have turned the scale in his favour. This is a sample of the kind of dialogue that took place about this time :—

Sugden, who has been waiting for ten minutes in a condition of suppressed excitement, hears a light foot-step descending the stairs. He stops walking up and down the room, takes up a photograph on the mantel-

piece and examines it curiously. His hand, it may be noticed, shakes a little, and he finds some difficulty in keeping still. The door opens and Kitty enters. Sugden drops the photograph like a hot potato, and clears his throat. Mindful of many excellent resolutions, he speaks a thought huskily.

“ You’re down early to-night. So am I. I always like being down in good time. Don’t you ? ” He laughs—a rather hollow and artificial laugh for Jack, who generally laughs easily enough. Good heavens ! he is thinking, could anything more inane have been said as a commencement ? And he had sternly resolved to abolish all unnecessary preludes. But there ! it cannot be done ! How is a man to trust his voice at once to utter words of vital import, without practising it first upon some commonplace. Here is an apparition—an angel in evening dress, distractingly lovely to the simple man—suddenly appearing within arm’s length ; and he is to say at once, “ Will you marry me ? ” No mortal could be guilty of such presumption. Besides, it takes an appreciable time for the voice to obey the will, after such a shock as this. It persists in taking the law into its own hands ; he may force himself to speak, but the unruly voice says its own words—says them, too, with a ridiculous quaver that makes him heartily ashamed.

Kitty, however, does not seem to notice. She laughs pleasantly in unison, and sinks gracefully into a chair—a fragile angel, pale and clear-cut as a marble figure, but alive and breathing, even laughing—a veritable girl of flesh and blood after all. Sugden takes a firm grip on himself, and tries again.

"Won't you come a little nearer the fire? It's awfully cold, isn't it? What a pretty dress that is!" The effort required to make this last remark, simple as it may sound, is almost superhuman. But it is done, and he breathes more freely in consequence. He is making a start at last.

The enemy—the too dear enemy—does not mind a compliment or two in private. She smiles. "How kind of you to notice it!" she says, with a gleam of mischief. "Do you really like it better than the one I had on last night?" Sugden's lips open promptly for a cordial assent. "Don't say 'yes,'" she interposes, laughing. "It is the same!"

Jack is dashed for a moment, as with a sudden douche of cold water. But surely there is an opportunity to press his advantage here—something daring about the dress being of small consequence, and so forth. Alas! his sluggard brain is too slow to catch it in time.

"I haven't got many, you see," she goes on, in a tone that almost invites condolence with the unregarded daughter, the Cinderella of the family. Sugden hardly hears; his brain is busy pursuing its own train of thought. It is time to be getting to closer quarters with the foe—the too adorable foe.

"I'm glad you came down early," he repeats. The wooer finds it difficult to escape from a word, a chance phrase, once used: it hangs about him, impeding his progress. So, too, you may sometimes hear the extempore preacher, apparently unable to get away from an expression employed at the beginning of his sermon, flounder upon it again and again to his own vexation,

and the amusement of a yawning audience. "I wanted to see you. I hardly ever get an opportunity of talking to you, now."

"Really, Mr. Sugden, when you see me at least a dozen times every day!"

"I mean alone."

Come, now, that was better. We are moving a little now. Kitty is silent, and yes! surely that is a faint pink stealing over her cheeks. Her eyes are lowered—a not unpropitious sign they say. Jack, whose voice always will get husky at these critical moments, clears his throat once more, as it were sounding the trumpet for a final advance.

"I have something I particularly want to tell you," he begins—but gets no further. A heavy step—the Colonel's—is heard outside. He comes in—perdition! all is over. "Why could I not have begun a little earlier?" says the unhappy Jack to himself once more. He curses, I fear, under his breath. Kitty, with rather a heightened colour, sighs audibly—whether in relief or sorrow I cannot say. And so the little scene ends once more, farcically enough.

The worst was that this sort of thing repeated itself so often. There were always interruptions, if not by the Colonel or some other of the family, then by Kitty herself. Once, when everything was proceeding in the most prosperous manner imaginable, at least ten minutes before any interruption from outside could reasonably be expected, the girl actually pretended she had left her handkerchief upstairs, and fled incontinently. What

could be done against a stroke so unexpected ? Jack waited awhile in a nervous tremor of expectation, but she did not return until the rest of the family were assembled. Well ! next time he would know better ; he would have it out with her if he had to put his back to the door. Time was getting short, too ; he must be going in another three days.

This move of Kitty's led, as it turned out, to the decisive stroke of the battle. It nerved her lover to a sort of frenzy. After all, he reflected, she must like him—a little—or she would never permit him to go on. And all these attempts, balked and foiled though they might have been, had surely made it clear enough that he loved her. She must know—that was something ; she did not seem to mind—that was everything. Jack's acquaintance with the ways of woman may not have been very profound, but it led him to a just conclusion. "I will have it out to-morrow," he decided that night, "if I have to watch all day for an opportunity."

And in consequence of this heroic resolution he did not stir out of the house all the morning, though it was a fine day, and the Colonel had graciously offered to show him round the far-famed links. At midday he met with his reward. Kitty, who had been with her mother in the drawing-room, went into the library to get a book. From the little smoking-room at the end of the hall, where he was meditating over a cigarette, Jack heard the footsteps. He rose quickly and followed. When he came to the door he paused a moment, a slight frown on his forehead. He was thinking hard of the first phrase he had composed the night before. It was

terse and very much to the point. Then he tightened his lips, summoned all his resolution, and turned the handle. He went in, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Mrs. Girdlestone saw no more of her daughter until luncheon, at which meal it was noticed that Jack talked rather faster than usual, with long lapses into silence. His eyes sought Kitty's from time to time, and were rewarded occasionally (when the coast was clear) with the faintest fleeting ghost of a smile. From which the experienced in these matters may infer, more or less accurately, what had happened after the library door closed behind Jack Sugden, the persistent, the resolute, the now successful wooer.

CHAPTER XII

IN the course of a very pleasant afternoon, Jack nevertheless contrived to find time to write a letter home, conveying the great news to his father. This famous despatch of a victorious general still exists in the Sugden archives, filed with certain other documents we have already mentioned in the right-hand drawer of the study writing-table at Stourton. The conqueror bore his honours modestly ; he was never one of those who indulge in fine writing. Indeed, he had no great love of the pen. In a family of poor correspondents he was perhaps the worst. He did not care about putting his inmost thoughts on paper, and his rare letters generally contained no more than a bare catalogue of events. But here was a special occasion : he was filled with a natural triumph, suffused with a rosy sentiment, some of which flowed into the ink, so to speak, in spite of habit and conviction. There are times when the dullest of us become tinged with a sort of eloquence.

“I have just asked the important question,” he wrote, “and she has accepted me. I can tell you I had some difficulty in getting it over, but it’s all right now, as far as she is concerned. I am going to see the Colonel

to-morrow, which I expect will be rather an awkward job, but I don't much care what happens now. I am just as happy as I can stick, and if the old ruffian makes any bones about it I'll punch his silly head. That's how I feel about it, only of course I shall be quite polite and proper. Kitty sends you her love. I told her what a thundering good chap you were, and she says she wishes her father was more like you. They are all terribly afraid of him in this house—even old Jimmy, who has been away the last two or three days—and he is in a worse temper than usual now because they are calling a general meeting of the golf club to consider some question or other. He's secretary of it, and thinks they ought to let him do just as he likes in everything—which he does pretty well, as it is.

“I told you all about Kitty before” (which, by the way, was absolutely untrue) “so I won't bother you by repeating it here, especially as I hope you will see her soon for yourself if all goes well. She is just the dearest girl on earth, and she says she always liked me” (a natural modesty had crossed out and almost completely obliterated the stronger expression) “from the first time we met. So I suppose it was love at first sight on both sides. Nobody knows anything about it as yet, and Kitty does not want them to until it is definitely settled. She will be of age in two years, so I suppose we shall have to wait until then if the Colonel objects. I don't know what he will say about it, but he's always been very decent to me. So I'll have to write again to-morrow, and tell you what has happened.”

I need not quote further from the letter, which was

universally admitted at the time to be the longest Jack had ever written home, as well as the most interesting. Mrs. Sugden, it is true, thought he might have said more about the girl, and regretted that he had not thought of sending a photograph. To do him justice, he had suggested it, but the young lady raised objections. Photographs were deceptive things, at the best, and she had not been taken for ages, and they were all hideous. And though Jack could not endorse this last statement, he was ready to agree that none of them did her anything like justice.

“But you must give me one for myself, Kitty—darling.” The last word was just a little strange to him yet ; it did not come quite readily. But it was becoming easier with each repetition. He practised it unconsciously when alone ; the word very nearly surprised him by presenting itself aloud, at afternoon tea, before Mrs. Girdlestone and two callers. Indeed, all through that day Jack was in a sort of dream.

“Must I, dearest ?” She leaned her head against his shoulder, laughing up at him. To think of it ! And a few hours ago they were stumbling painfully towards each other, children in the dark, along a road strewn with rocky formalities. And for one black moment he had thought she was going to say No. Are there not astonishing changes even in the most commonplace of lives ?

“I can’t call you Jack yet comfortably,” she sighed. “But I like the other better—don’t you ?”

He signified his assent, in the customary fashion. This, too, is a branch of education at which a man can make

remarkable progress in the shortest of times. They had met once more—so kind sometimes is pure chance—in the still deserted library.

“If you insist upon it, I suppose you must have one,” she murmured. “Must you? They are such ugly things.”

“I must and will have one,” said the imperious monster, “if it was as ugly as sin. And it’s as pretty as an angel, though not pretty enough for you, dearie.”

“Jack—there! I’ve said it—are you going to bully me dreadfully after—afterwards?”

Possibly she may have hoped secretly that he would begin to play the tyrant at once. There are some young ladies who positively enjoy being ordered about—even for a year or two after marriage. The attitude they adopt is singularly pleasing to the male animal, especially when he is new to the business. The conqueror’s heart swelled with pride.

“I must have that one in evening dress,” he said, with an air of calm authority that did him infinite credit. The arm encircling Kitty’s waist tightened perceptibly, as though to intimate that there was no escape from the tyrant’s decision.

“Shall I fetch it now?” murmured his obedient subject. But it was hardly to be expected that he would let her go so soon—and she knew it. Victory in love is a whetstone that sharpens the simplest wits. Mindful of past meetings Jack stipulated that she should come down early for dinner, and bring it with her. In the meantime—but how late it was! It was almost time to go and dress already.

But they waited a few minutes longer. Already it was bitter to separate, even for an hour. A sudden wave of apprehension swept over her. She sighed.

“Dearest, must you tell him to-morrow?” She fingered the top button of his coat nervously. “Suppose—suppose he doesn’t like it! Can’t you wait a little—just a little? We are quite happy as it is—are we?”

But Jack believed in action, and waiting was no part of his programme. Also he was an obstinate man, and had a sense of duty. He shook his head.

“No! I must get through with it,” he said. “It’s not playing the game to keep it dark, and it won’t get any easier with waiting.” He laughed. “The more I look at it the less I like it, and that’s why I’m going to get it over, darling. I’ll tackle the Colonel to-morrow morning.” He squared his shoulders with an air of resolution.

“Dearest—but if—suppose——” She paused.

“Well! if he doesn’t like it, it can’t be helped,” said the indomitable lover. “We must just wait till you’re—till we’re both of age—and till I’ve made enough money to live on.” His eyes kindled. “By Jove! I wish I was at work already. You—you’ll wait for me, Kitty?”

“Yes—Jack,” came in rather muffled tones. She raised a flushed warm face from his shoulder, the suspicion of a tear glistening in her eyes. The compact was sealed.

“You are not unhappy?” he queried anxiously. And when the dear girl smiled back, and shook her head, and turned swiftly to escape upstairs, becoming suddenly a different being altogether, he sat down for a few moments and gazed at the fire, wondering how such a treasure had

fallen into his hands. He gazed at the glowing coals, and bright fantasies of the future raced through his head, swift as the living pictures of a cinematograph. He felt, as most men feel on such occasions, that he was all unworthy of this happiness. What had he done to deserve a girl's love—the love of such a girl as this? Well, it was his to render himself worthy, or as worthy as might be; to work his life through to make her happy: first of all to get his feet upon the ladder, to make a start in his profession. Honest Jack Sugden, true son of his father, breathed a simple prayer to the Almighty for help in the task thus set before him. Then, with a glance at the clock, he too dashed off to change for dinner, and to keep his tryst in the drawing-room.

Yes, the Colonel had to be tackled; and the Colonel, red-faced and rather explosive in manner, sat at the head of his table through dinner blissfully unconscious of the ordeal in front of him. His guest, only too conscious of the future, was hard put to it to preserve an attitude of unconcern. When the ladies left the room and the two were alone together over a bottle of port, Jack debated for a moment whether it might not be better to speak at once and get it over. But unhappily he chanced to say something about the golf club, and immediately his host was off at score, working himself up into a temper about the behaviour of those recalcitrant members who had called the general meeting. It was obviously unwise to approach him on any delicate subject at present. Jack registered a mental vow not to introduce golfing topics again the next morning.

“After breakfast,” he repeated to himself. “Before

he goes out for his morning round." He added in his heart a fervent wish that the lady of the house might have ordered something especially succulent for that meal. The Colonel's temper in the morning depended largely upon the nature of the dishes set before him. It was never easy to get hold of him in the morning either. For an hour or so after breakfast he shut himself up in his study with the paper and his letters, and anybody who entered the room during that time was apt to retire in disorder, hastily and with a red face. But, after all, it was the only time at which there was any certainty of catching him.

The morning came—a bright, sunny morning, with just a touch of frost in the air—an ideal morning for golf. Jack breathed a sigh of relief, for his hopes might have been marred by rain or snow, or even by an ice-bound course. He watched his prospective father-in-law at table with some anxiety. The Colonel seemed distinctly more tractable than usual, if so dictatorial a person could ever be termed tractable. He ate heartily ; he even condescended to a joke. The omens were favourable.

The two young people stole a glance at each other when the Colonel rose at length and left the room. Two minutes later Jack followed him, with a murmured apology. The party broke up. Kitty, passing through the hall, was just in time to see the door of the study close, cutting sharply in two her father's exclamation of surprise at so early a visitor. An access of nervous terror seized upon her : she turned white, her hand upon the bannisters, deprived momentarily of all power of move-

ment. The secret was being told. She fancied she could hear a sudden interruption, a voice raised in anger. What would he say? Her vivid imagination pictured the scene, as before it had painted a very different duologue. She stood there alone for perhaps three minutes, listening intently, hearing nothing but a dull murmur of voices. Then suddenly the bell-wire grated harshly, and she caught the faint tinkle of a bell in the distant kitchen. The spell was broken: she turned and fled hastily like a startled hare.

“He wants me,” she thought, “he wants me!” And what was she to say, what could she do? She had wild thoughts for the moment of escaping, of feigning illness, of hiding in a cupboard. Her nerves were all unstrung, she was in a state of unreasoning panic terror. She reached her room upstairs, and sat shivering, waiting for the expected summons. And then, gradually, reason returned, and she pulled herself together with an effort—an effort that she could never have made three days before. Jack was there! The thought of him gave her courage. He was there, waiting for her: she need not be afraid with him by her side. After all they had done nothing so very dreadful. The fluttering heart was calmed by degrees, she breathed more easily. “What a little coward I am!” she said to herself, smiling pitifully. “Oh! and there is Emma at the door.”

“Please, miss, the master would like to see you a moment in the study.”

Kitty sought her voice and found it with difficulty. “Yes, all right,” she contrived to call in uncertain tones. Womanlike, she turned to the glass and tidied a few

stray filaments of hair. With a stifled sigh she nerved herself for the ordeal: descended slowly—paused—entered. So might Daniel have felt ushered into that famous den.

But the Colonel was sitting in his chair before the writing table, wearing an expression rather jocular than otherwise. Jack was standing, easily enough, by the fire. Perhaps it was not so very serious after all. There had been no bloodshed at any rate.

“Well now, what’s the meaning of all this, eh ?” began her father with some show of parental sternness. “What’s it all mean, I should like to know. Here’s Sugden coming in, at this unearthly hour in the morning, and spinning a long yarn about wanting to be engaged. Ridiculous, of course, absolutely ridiculous ! Why, he’s barely of age yet, and you—how old are you—eh ?”

In a rather faltering voice Kitty contrived to intimate that she was nineteen—would be twenty in four months’ time.

“Nineteen—I told you so. It’s absurd, positively absurd. Just what I told you, Sugden, eh ? Much too young, both of you. What have you got to say about it now ?”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t wait a little——” Sugden began.

“Wait? Exactly what I say—you must wait. Eh, Kitty.”

“Yes, father,” in a very low tone, with downcast eyes.

Jack made another gallant effort to get a word in. “If you allow us to be engaged, sir, that is all——”

“Engaged !” The Colonel turned upon him with a

touch of his military manner. "My good fellow, have we not just agreed it would be ridiculous, absurd, madness? Think over it—use a little commonsense. Engaged—at nineteen! Come now, don't you see it's entirely out of the question? What your people would think of it I don't know, but no man in his senses would allow his daughter to be engaged at nineteen to a young fellow with no profession. Would it be fair now, eh? I ask you, is it fair to tie a young girl down at that age, when she can't know her own mind, to a man with no particular prospects, as far as I can see?"

Jack, flushed and a little incoherent, attempted explanation. They loved each other; they were content to take their chance.

"You are content to take your chance," pursued the father, conscious of his advantage. "But what about the girl? Now, look here, Sugden, let's drop this now. I must be getting on with my work. Mind you, I've no objection to you personally, but you tell me you've nothing to live on bar a trifling allowance from your father. Kitty here hasn't got a penny of her own. Most men would have refused to listen to your proposal altogether, but there!" He waved his arm, as if to deprecate praise of an astounding generosity. "Of course, any engagement of any sort is absolutely out of the question. But if, when you're at the Bar, you can come here and shew me that you have a respectable income—say in three or four years' time or more—enough to marry on without fear of starvation, why! we'll see about it. Eight hundred a year—I put it as low as any reasonable man could. There now, let's

have no more of this foolishness." He dipped his pen in the inkstand as a sign that the interview was terminated.

"Very well, sir, I'll come back some day." It seemed a long way off to the speaker, but he was young, and sanguine, and in good health, and were not other men making fortunes every day? Kitty stole a look at him as she left the room, and their eyes met. He shook hands and said goodbye to the Colonel. It was time to be going—to make a start on the arduous climb to fortune. He would leave for London by the midday train.

The careful father spoke not unkindly at parting. "When you do come back," he remarked genially, "I'll be glad to see you, as you know. But in the meanwhile—no nonsense about rings and promises, and that kind of thing, eh? You understand, Sugden, we can't have any correspondence, of course. The girl is to be free to do as she likes. Yes; you can bind yourself if you like—that doesn't concern me"—a trifle testily in reply to a protestation on Jack's part—"but I can't have the girl reminded of your existence by getting letters and all that sort of rubbish. And now"—the harassed man indicated his unfinished correspondence with a sigh—"I've an appointment at the club-house in half an hour. Good-bye, Sugden. I shall hope to hear of your getting on well in a year or so."

"I suppose I may say goodbye to Kitty." A less conscientious lover would have taken that for granted, at any rate, but Jack was always afflicted with an excess of straightforwardness. Fortunately on this occasion the Colonel was too impatient to argue about trifles; he

growled a hasty assent, and turned to his desk again. "Confound the young fools!" he muttered as the door closed. He saw half-a-crown lost to his old enemy as a result of the morning's worry. "They might have known it would ruin my game for the day," was his final comment on the situation.

So they had their final interview, these two, in which Jack explained with great care that he considered himself bound for the term of his natural life, whereas she was to be free as the winds; and Kitty, on her side, asked him if he thought so meanly of her after all that had happened as to suppose for one moment that she could even think of any one else. And so forth—after the manner of their kind—no doubt much to their mutual satisfaction. Both felt a sort of relief, I expect, now that the arbiter of their fate had spoken, and not dashed them utterly to the ground. They were not to be engaged, it was true, but for all practical purposes their position was very much the same. Feminine subtlety, conjoined with feminine logic, was prepared to evade uncomfortable restrictions, had not masculine directness shorn remorselessly through the flimsy web. There were to be no letters, no presents—that was final—the father's decision. But where a man and a woman are at variance, the weaker must have her compromise, at the least.

"Then must you give me back the photograph?" inquired the artless girl with a sigh.

Honesty frowned, considering. His brow cleared. "That was before the prohibition," he decided. "I don't think that counts."

“And am I to have nothing in exchange, to remind me of you ?”

“If I had only given you something before.”

“Oh, Jack, it’s not fair. And you did really, too, because you told me I could have anything I liked. It’s the same thing, isn’t it now ?”

He shook his head, solemnly weighing right and wrong.

“There, then !” Her deft fingers delicately abstracted a tiny gold scarf-pin from his tie. “I’ve taken it ; you never gave it me. But I must have something.” The dark eyes pled so eloquently that the precisian forebore to argue the point. For she was now a mischievous fairy, roguish and melting by turns ; he perceived dimly that logic was of no avail with such. He laughed ; the clock struck ; he sighed. So quickly fled the minutes that should have been winged with lead. And how long might it not be before they met again ! A year and a half at the earliest—unless miracles intervened. They would both be of age then, anyway.

An hour or so later, seated in his third-class carriage (for already he was bent upon the strictest economy) Jack Sugden, putting his hand into his great coat pocket in search of a tobacco-pouch, happened upon something hard and oblong, with square edges. He extracted it in some perplexity, and discovered it to be a book of verse. On the fly-leaf was inscribed, in Kitty’s delicate handwriting, her own name ; underneath, more hastily scribbled, he read “To Jack,” with the date. He turned over the pages, and found one or two verses with

a pencil-mark against them, which he read. There was one—a sonnet—marked with a double cross. Jack knew nothing about sonnets, but it struck him as being rather pretty—

“THE COMING OF EROS.

“Musing I sate within a garden fair,
Soft breezes whispered, and the rippling sea
Smiled in the sunlight, when Love came to me.
He came—I saw him not—but in the air
A sweet delicious languor everywhere
O’erspread my senses. . . .”

These are the first few lines, but the book is still copyright. The curious may find the remainder in March’s “Wind-flowers.” It was not until Jack Sugden was approaching Liverpool Street that he had the curiosity to look at the title of the book he was reading in order to discover the author’s name. When he read “By Theodore March” in gold letters on the cover he laughed aloud.

“By Jove!” he said. “That must be the little beggar who was at school with me. That was his name, sure enough—Theodore March! And he was always a dab at verses. Well, that beats everything! And to think of Kitty having his book, and giving it to me, of all people in the world! Dear little Kitty.” He sighed portentously, and gazing at her scribbled line on the fly-leaf, smiled, and kissed the writing tenderly. Then he put the volume gently into his breast-pocket and rose to collect his belongings. He had arrived in London, where he was to make a fortune for her sake.

CHAPTER XIII

IT is not, perhaps, necessary for the purpose of this history to relate in detail the monotonous sequence of events during the next two years or so of Jack Sugden's life. The process of reading for the Bar is not particularly interesting, although it does not consist entirely, in these days, of consuming a certain number of dinners every term (three in the case of a University student), and of passing a certain amount of time among the well-stocked shelves of the Middle Temple Library, in the pleasing society of many men of various colours drawn from different parts of the British Empire. Sugden possessed a distant cousin, already called, and enjoying something of a practice. To him he had been recommended to apply for advice as to the proper course to pursue, and he sought his rooms in Fig Tree Court the morning after his arrival in London.

“There are several ways of doing it,” was the great man's opinion ; “but if you want to practise you must pay for your experience. Some men get called for no reason at all except the pleasure of putting ‘barrister-at-law’ after their names. I take it that's not your idea.”

Sugden explained his views. Briefly put, he wanted to

make as much money as possible in the shortest space of time. The other laughed.

“That’s explicit, at any rate. Most of us want the same, but we don’t all say so. And uncommonly few of us make any money at all. However, I’ll give you good advice, and you must take your chance with the rest. It’s an overcrowded profession.”

“I want to do it as cheap as it can be done,” put in Sugden, mindful of economy.

“So did I—so do a good many of us. But it isn’t to be done on the cheap—if you’re going to make anything out of it. Look at me, now. I put in one year at a solicitor’s office, and another as pupil with a practising barrister—a hundred guineas a year each. Then there’s another hundred goes in fees when you’re called. Of course you can get the name, without the reality, if you pay your fees and pass your examinations. But what’s the use of it? You must learn something of the business.”

Sugden’s eyes opened wide. “I shall have to scrape a bit,” he said, rather ruefully. “I had no idea it came to so much as all that.”

“Well, your father will pay the fees, I suppose. Personally, I had no one behind me. I saved up enough to get through on, and not much more. However, I got through—and here I am !”

“I’m going to get through too.” Sugden was always ready to be fired with emulation. “But I’ll have to live cheap, anyway. Can you help me to some rooms ?”

His cousin grinned approval of the sentiment. “Oh ! you’ll get there all right,” he assented readily. “You

were always a bit of a plugger. As for rooms, I took a bed-sitting room at ten bob a week, out Pimlico way. I dare say it's open now, or something on the same mark, if you care to take it."

"I'll go round and look it up," said Sugden promptly, and he took the address down in his notebook.

He went there that afternoon, and the landlady, though she could not take him in herself, sent him on to a personal friend some half a dozen doors further down the street, who consented, after a certain amount of haggling to the terms. Jack got his things out of the hotel where he had put up on his arrival with great celerity. For he had no idea of wasting money just then. What with these fees to be paid, and more than two years to get through before he could possibly begin to grow rich, he was in no mood for incurring unnecessary expense.

In the heart of most there lies hid a seed of the miserly spirit, ready to grow up and flourish amazingly if it receive the slightest encouragement. Who shall say there is no charm in the hoarding of money? Jack himself—one of the freest and most generous souls alive in older days, who regarded money not a whit more than his amiable father, and could spend royally or live penitiously with the serenest equanimity—began now to regard the state of his balance at the bank (which he kept noted down on the blank page at the end of his cheque-book) with much the same avaricious sentiment that grips the real miser. It rejoiced him to see the figures slowly creeping up. He cut down his expenses to the verge of parsimony. During his first year he saved quite fifty pounds out of

his allowance, besides another five and twenty that he made out of a private pupil, betrayed into his hands by that kindly cousin, to be coached for the Little-Go in mathematics. He did not report in full to his father all the information he had gleaned from that rising barrister. The young man had his share of pride. If Durrant—the cousin in question—had struggled through without assistance, surely he could manage on a hundred and fifty a year. But he would have to do without that solicitor's office. He devoted himself to steady plugging, as he was fond of phrasing it, for his preliminary examinations, surmounting them separately at the cost of some months' hard labour apiece. Roman Law, Constitutional Law and Legal History, Procedure, Evidence and Criminal Law—he packed his brain with arid details as laboriously and methodically as a gang of stevedores wedge tea-chests into a steamer's hold.

“I was never brilliant,” he used to explain to the amiable Durrant, still prodigal of sound maxims; “but, thank Heaven! when I once get a thing inside me, it sticks.” The other was not long in conceiving a sort of affection for his new-found cousin, whom he had not seen since he was in Eton jackets. He cheered him on with stories of his own early struggles, interspersed with even more alluring tales of the youth of great men now seated securely on the bench, or in receipt of fabulous incomes as leading counsel.

“It's all a lottery,” he would say sometimes, “but it's a lottery with a reservation in favour of those who really mean business. Like most professions, I suppose.” He would go on, in his darker moments, to instance men of

known ability who had come up with everything in their favour—men who had swept the board of prizes and scholarships, who had been good speakers, brimful of energy and talent—and yet had waited for years without securing a chance of being heard. Some few had given it up in despair, and taken to other professions. And yet, it might be, if they had stuck to it a year longer—

“That’s it!” Sugden would interpose eagerly. “It’s only a question of waiting long enough. I’m not going to give in if I can help it.”

“Well, many good men have failed, and I dare say some fools have succeeded—if that’s any consolation. There’s one thing in your favour—you’re a rowing blue.” There would follow tales of legal luminaries who had exchanged sliding seats in a light ship for more secure and comfortable chairs in high places. Durrant impressed upon him the necessity of a wide acquaintance with men and things, no less than with courts of law. “The more you know of things in general, and mankind in particular, the better for you,” he explained. “A barrister, like a journalist, should know a little about everything. When you get on the bench, you can pretend ignorance of matters everybody knows; until then, the more you know the better.” He took him to the Courts, that he might hear how cases were conducted; he introduced him to friends; he incited him to talk and to pick up knowledge. “There never was a man yet—even an absolute jackass—that I couldn’t get some information out of if I tried hard,” he said. “And you never know if the most unlikely men may not turn out useful, in time.”

Jack developed rapidly under his friend's tuition. He was a boy when he came up to town : he was a man when he had been there a few months. Indeed, London of itself is a great teacher ; it will not suffer you to remain young for long, unless you deliberately shut yourself up and deny access to its subtle influence. He made acquaintances rapidly, in most walks of life ; he joined a club, on Durrant's advice, though the subscription was something of a wrench to his new-found avarice.

“It'll pay you in the end,” his mentor assured him. “Take the Effingham—you'll meet all sorts there, and it's not too stiff. They talk. I belonged myself once upon a time. And you must have one square meal a day—you'll get it there better and cheaper than at a restaurant, and you won't have to tip the waiter. I'm going to take you in hand and see you through : when you're Lord Chancellor perhaps you'll bear my name in mind.”

So Jack joined the Effingham, and made friends with decent rapidity, and learned a good deal from some members of that rather mixed coterie, which included authors, journalists, barristers, who had not yet become famous, and a fair sprinkling of other young men (of all ages) in many other professions, who in all probability never would become famous. It was a pleasant institution, housed in a dingy tenement in the Adelphi ; and the members did not scowl at a new-comer over the top of the *Times* and *Morning Post*, but were ready to take him on and argue with him upon any subject at a moment's notice with rare and refreshing candour.

His second year he calculated that he had saved enough to spend something on learning his business. A hundred guineas all at once was more than he could manage, in view of future possibilities, but he thought he could spare fifty. He went, as usual, to Durrant for assistance.

"I think I can screw up enough for half a year, at all events," he said.

Durrant eyed him anxiously.

"Are you doing it off your own bat, my son?"

And Jack explained how things stood. He didn't like to draw on the old man more than he could help, he said. "He gives me a hundred and fifty a year, and I know he's running it pretty close to do that. To ask him for another hundred, casually, would be sheer cruelty. He'd do it, of course. You don't know the old man, Durrant. He'd be as cheery as ever, but he'd feel it—and so should I. I could never look him in the face again."

"And you never told him about the necessity of getting experience, and the rest of it?"

Jack shook his head. "I couldn't have done it," he said with a smile. "He'd have sold up all the furniture to get the money, rather than let me go without any advantage. I told him what the fees were for getting called, and I wish I hadn't. He's probably screwing away to save that now, though I mean to pay it myself and told him I could manage perfectly well. I tell you I have all the trouble in the world to keep them from starving themselves to death at home to send me money." Sugden's face glowed with a generous enthusiasm. "You don't

know the old man," he repeated. "I don't know all of him myself, but I know him better than I did."

"Well, I met him once," said the other, "and I'm prepared to believe anything in his favour. I believe you're a pair." He reflected. "Now look here!" he said suddenly. "I'll tell you what will be the best way out. I'd take you on myself willingly, as you know, for nothing, but it's better for you to be with some one with a larger practice. Besides, it's good for you to pay away some of your money. You're a millionaire compared with what I was at your age." He leaned back in his chair and rolled a cigarette with deliberation. "Yes, it'll be better for you to go to some one else—to begin with, at all events. The worst is, it's not everybody who cares to take a half-year pup. The best men can get as many as they want, full timers. But I know Blair pretty well, and I think he'll do it for me. He's got as good a common-law practice as most of them. I'll speak to him—and afterwards you can put in half a year with me if you can't run to the full amount."

This was how the matter was settled finally, and Jack spent a half year with that eminent barrister, Blair of Lincoln's Inn, much to his own profit and not a little to that of his master. For a hard-working and tolerably intelligent pupil can be of considerable use to the gentleman who permits him to frequent his rooms. It is his privilege to draft defences, to look up cases, and so forth, if he cares to take the trouble—and Sugden was never the man to shrink from taking trouble. He was beginning to take an interest even in the dry details of his profession—or rather, let us say, the details that seem so

dry to the layman, for to the true lawyer nothing connected with his craft can be uninteresting. His is the critical joy of the connoisseur in a rare vintage. The taste, to be sure, must be acquired ; it is rarely born with a man, even when he comes of the most ancient legal stock : he grows gradually to a relish for the nice points, the subtle discriminations : the detection of a flaw becomes a pleasure keener than that of the critic who discovers a false rhyme. Thus it is, I fancy, that mathematicians make commonly the best lawyers. They have studied accuracy from their youth up ; they have acquired a positive hatred of inexactness.

The family at Stourton had not seen much of Jack since that day when he had left them to lay his heart and worldly possessions (such as they were) at the feet of a certain young lady in Essex, with the result that we know. Journeys were expensive, work was pressing, and at the best progress was terribly slow. Sometimes the young man was half inclined to wish he had taken up something that promised a speedier return for his labour. Durrant was by no means always encouraging. He had a vast repertory of stories ending dismally in failure after a brilliant start, with the brightest prospects. Sugden could only console himself with the undeniable truth that he was never brilliant himself, and that his own prospects were at present anything but rosy. After all, at what could he hope to succeed, if not at this ? Here lay the one subject suited, so far as he could see, to his limited capacity. He had common sense—and is not all law common sense sublimated and refined, if sometimes rather obscured by the process ? True, he might have

taken orders, but never with the thought of making money of his ministrations. He might have gone into business, but that would have been to waste his education. It was too late to think of entering the army: medicine had no particular attractions for him. The bar, at least, held out a chance of fortune: it appealed to the gambling element that lies hid in most of us; and besides, he felt that here at least he was no worse equipped than his fellows. Durrant had succeeded—that is to say, he was making a reasonable income after about ten years' practice—and Durrant had started under no better auspices than his own. In the back of his mind Jack Sugden was very firmly convinced that energy and perseverance, conjoined with common sense, could accomplish anything. He seldom allowed himself to remain long under the shadowing doubt of ultimate success.

He had been to Stourton twice for short visits, and that was all. But now, after more than eighteen months in London, he began to hunger for the country, and the sight of his own people, and a little healthy exercise other than walking the streets, varied with a rare expedition up the river or an occasional game of fives with a friend who happened to be a lecturer at King's College. It was hot summer weather; the middle of August had come; Blair and Durrant had fled to cooler climes, intent on salmon fishing in Norway: it was mere waste of time remaining any longer to be grilled alive in the sultry streets. Jack, after battling for two or three days against a thermometer varying from eighty to ninety in the shade, rose early one morning, packed his bag, despatched a telegram, and took the nine-thirty down from St.

Pancras, rejoicing in the prospect of a fortnight's holiday. London faded away behind him: he emerged like a sleeper awaking after troubled dreams, into a brighter sunlight, clearer air, the open country. Heavens! how could those toiling millions elect to dwell in a city when they might be ploughing the fields in the open air? And he too was becoming a Londoner—of his own will and choice. Well, at the least it was for a great prize, and he was not going to live there more than he could help. His mind roved freely over the future: he was alone in his carriage, and the rapid motion always imparted fire and vigour to his dreams. It was not long before he took an envelope out of his pocket, and, opening it carefully, gazed upon a photograph within. Practical common sense, from head to foot, his friends called him; but he kissed the inanimate cardboard gently. In fact, he had done so every day for some eighteen months. Practical common sense is no less a creature of habit than his fellows; perhaps more, for he does not concern himself with self-analysis. So he rolled onwards, in the morning express, towards Stourton Rectory and an expectant family.

CHAPTER XIV

THE energetic rector of Stourton was away when his son arrived, and would not be back till dinner-time, said Mrs. Sugden. She and Evelyn entertained the traveller at luncheon.

“He was so sorry to miss you,” said the mother, “but he had to go. There’s a County Council Meeting—one of his committees. He said he couldn’t stay at home even for the pleasure of seeing you.”

“It’s good to see you again, anyway. I can tell you I’m glad to get away for a bit, mother. Do I look a wreck? London’s no sort of a catch this weather. And you look as fresh as daisies. Why did I ever go to town, when I might have had a farm in the country? Evy now—look at her—she’s as fresh as paint. Don’t I look pale?” He laughed heartily: coming home again had sent his spirits up with a bound.

“Poor boy! it must be terrible,” the fond mother admitted, smiling placidly. “But you don’t look much the worse for it.”

“I never saw him look much better,” laughed his sympathetic sister. “Jack, you’re a fraud. You should see poor father. He’s really looking quite worried.”

“Worried? Skittles! You’ll never persuade me the old man’s looking worried,” said Jack, with conviction. Indeed, it did not seem easy to imagine such a condition of things, to any one who knew Frank Sugden at all intimately.

“Well, as worried as he ever does look,” Evelyn explained in self-defence. “He didn’t sing a bit this morning, did he, mother? I always know he’s upset about something when I don’t hear him singing. Just as he goes into his study, you know, after breakfast.”

“I know.” Jack raised his voice in imitation of his parent’s magnificent bass, following up the attempt with a peal of laughter. “That’s it—to the life. Dear old chap! You don’t mean to say he didn’t bellow this morning? He must be bad.”

“I don’t think he is quite as well as usual,” said Mrs. Sugden, in her quiet voice. “You must cheer him up, Jack. He’s always so glad to have a quiet talk with you in the study.”

“I’ll cheer him right enough. I feel as lively as a fatted calf. Evy, what’s on this afternoon? Any tennis parties? I am too much the fatted calf up in London; I want exercise.”

By good luck there was a party, four miles off—the Chestertons, near Fleckney, who generally had quite decent tennis.

“I meant to ask you if you cared to go,” said Evelyn, “but your coming put it out of my head. Oh! it will be jolly having some tennis again. I’ve been nowhere this year at all. We’re always so busy.” She sighed regretfully. “And it’s all nearly over now.”

“Poor Evy!” The mother stroked her hair tenderly. “I’m afraid she finds it a little dull sometimes.”

Evelyn laughed. “Mother, darling, I’m never dull. But it will be nice to go out again with Jack just for once.”

And Jack, rubbing his hands gleefully, declared his conviction that they were going to have no end of a time.

“You’re all getting moped, I can see,” he protested. “I’ll make you sit up before I’ve done with you. You’re as solemn as a brace of boiled owls. I don’t wonder the old man’s looking a bit worried. Let’s order the dog-cart at once, Evy. Father hasn’t taken it, has he? Gone by train—that’s all right. We’ll start at two-thirty sharp. Where are my tennis shoes? We’ll show them how to play tennis at the Chestertons. That young cub of theirs fancies himself a bit, doesn’t he? I could give him half-thirty any day. Mother, have I got a decent pair of flannels in the house?”

“I had two pairs sent to be cleaned when you went away last year,” said that admirable manager. “They’re upstairs in your room. You have one flannel shirt and two cotton ones. James pipeclayed the shoes this morning after we got your telegram.”

“Did you ever see any one like her?” inquired her son of the world in general.

Indeed there were not many housewives in the kingdom of the calibre of Mrs. Sugden. She did not talk about what she was doing, but went and did it quietly, without hurry and without ostentation. Her eyes ranged over everything, from the store of preserving

sugar to her son's shooting boots, and she seemed to know by instinct where the most unlikely things were to be found. If her husband had mislaid the notes for his next Sunday's sermon (which he was in the habit of doing about once a month) it was Mrs. Sugden who came to the rescue; if there was a member of the household whose boots were getting thin in the sole, it was Mrs. Sugden who took care that they were despatched to old Haines, the village cobbler, before the mischief had gone beyond repair. As a natural consequence husband, son, and daughter turned to her whenever anything went astray for the moment, or if anything were required in a hurry, in the serenest confidence that the deficiency would be supplied with quiet promptitude.

Jack was in the best of spirits all that afternoon. He inhaled great draughts of the fresh country air as they drove along the Fleckney road, once they were beyond the dust and smoke of the quarries that encircled the Rectory. He was home again, away from London and its toiling millions, sweltering in the fierce glare of an August sun; here were honest smooth macadam roads bordered with generous green grass, instead of wood or asphalte, and the glare of blinding pavement on either side.

"Trees are better than shop windows any day," he said, sighing with contentment. "See that covey?" He pointed with his whip to a brood of young partridges running for shelter to the hedge-side. "And look at that show of poppies in that wheat field. That's old Hirst, for a dollar. The worst farmer in the parish, and it's our land too." He laughed merrily. "It's good to

be back again, and see you all. Evy, we'll paint the country-side red—red as a rock rabbit."

He enlivened the way with a continual succession of chatter. It was noticeable that Jack was becoming much more of the ready talker than he used to be. He began to display some of his father's inventiveness in the matter of racy similes, selected, it must be owned, more from their alliterative charm than from their abstract truth.

"I must bring Durrant down here," he went on. "No end of a good chap is Durrant, and he's a sort of cousin of ours too. He came here once, he said, when we were kids. You'd like Durrant, Evy." He flicked the horse, and sighed. "I wish I had half his brains, and I might manage. Eight hundred a year is the figure. He's making more than that—though not so very much. Well, I'm going to have a good try for it." He lapsed into sentiment. "I wonder when we shall bring it off," he mused.

"Let me see the photograph once more."

His sister, a true woman, loved to talk on these matters, or, rather, to listen to his rhapsodies. She nursed her own secret experience; to hear him talk of love was like experimenting upon a half-healed wound: there was a fearful pleasure in awaiting the chance word that might set her nerves quivering, and prove the hurt not yet cicatrised. And yet it was healing—perhaps by now it was almost healed—or she could not have dared the experiment. When we begin to find that same fearful pleasure in recalling misery, we are in a fair way to be cured.

They talked of Kitty Girdlestone and cognate subjects for the remainder of the drive. Of Kitty and her family, including the Colonel.

“He was quite right,” said Jack. “The old Colonel was perfectly right, and I wonder now he didn’t send me straight out of the house. On the whole he treated me a lot better than I had any right to expect. I believe he’s a good sort, inside. But he does bully that family of his.”

He diverged into anecdote. The Colonel proved so fruitful a subject that he was still occupying the pair when they turned into the Chestertons’ drive.

CHAPTER XV

IT is a fact," said Jack Sugden suddenly, "that I haven't heard you laugh more than twice—not what I call a good healthy laugh—since you came back this evening."

Father and son were sitting once again in the study after dinner. The window was open, but there was scarcely a breath of wind to disturb the rings of smoke that eddied slowly towards it. It was dusk, but the lamp had not been brought in. There was to be no work to-night, for it was Jack's first evening at home. And, besides, a lamp invariably attracted all the moths in the neighbourhood. No tender-hearted man can possibly work while these reckless creatures persist in attempting, like the Ammonites of old, to pass through the fire of Moloch, and Sugden was nothing if not tender-hearted. It was a case of no light or a closed window, and conversation can be carried on as freely in the growing darkness of a summer evening as in the full light of day. Sometimes perhaps more freely. It was possible to distinguish a black mass in the arm-chair on the left of the fireplace: occasionally, when he drew at his pipe, a ruddy glow would be shed over the Rector's nose, just

displaying two cavernous eyes above. Opposite sat his son, in his favourite position, his feet propped up against the now disused coal-box. They conversed, as men will after dinner, in short, disjointed sentences—long-range firing, as it were—a sentence emitted from one side meeting with its reply several seconds later, or even at a longer interval. The answer was often no more than an inarticulate grunt of assent. The two were on terms that made a brisk dialogue unnecessary ; they had also done a good day's work apiece, had fed well, and were smoking. Jack's speech, reported above, was the first connected sentence of any length that either had produced since dinner.

The clergyman uncrossed his knees. "Ha!" he said reflectively. There was a considerable pause. "H'm." He crossed his legs again, and drew at his pipe. "That sounds bad," he admitted at last, with a laugh that was almost convincing in the growing darkness.

"Anything wrong? They think you're overworked."

"Do they?" Sugden smoked for half a minute in silence. "I must be a worse actor than I thought."

"Then you are worried about something."

A slight movement was perceptible in the depths of the armchair, but there was no immediate reply. It was a full minute before the father leaned forward to knock his ashes into the fireplace.

"Yes," he said. "I'm keeping it in—I've been keeping it to myself—and that's a thing I'm not used to. It had better come out, I suppose." He spoke quite seriously.

"Much better get it off your chest," assented his son, after a protracted pause.

The parson tapped his pipe against the heel of his shoe reflectively. "It concerns you as much as any of us," he began. "More—I might say. I'd have told you five months ago, but I kept hoping something would happen. It seems rough, but I ought to have looked into it earlier. It's my own fault, I expect."

"Come—cheer up! Money, I suppose—and what's money, anyway?"

His father pulled at his beard for a few minutes, humming a disjointed tune. At last he spoke.

"Hirst has given me notice. He's going to give up the farm. And from all I can hear the old ruffian has fairly worked it out. It'll take two or three years to get it into condition again."

Jack whistled softly. He began a sentence, and stopped suddenly. It was in his mind to remark that he had always maintained Hirst was the biggest scoundrel unhung, but upon reflection he refrained. "I told you so" is never the warmest comfort.

"He gives it up at Michaelmas?" was all he said.

Sugden signified an affirmative and heaved a sigh. "Well! I'm glad to get it over," he said. "It's been lying heavy on me—heavy as lead. Jack, my boy, it leaves us thin—very thin indeed—singularly emaciated. I doubt if I can help you much more. The allowance will have to stop. Fortunately we've a decent balance at the bank. I can let you have a hundred for those fees, I expect."

Jack gave a short laugh. "What'll there be for the

family, assuming you can't get another tenant?" he asked.

"Not two hundred, by some way, what with rates and taxes. And another tenant—Clarke says it's an impossibility. I should have to pay a man to take it, in the state it's in. I can't farm it myself, without capital. If I let some one have it free for a three years' term, he said it was just on the cards—but I should have to be sure of my man. No, my boy, we're about done over this. I've got the house and about a hundred a year from the quarry, and the interest on the marriage settlement, and that's the lot. The question is—how little can you do with? Can you get through with another hundred?"

Jack smoked placidly. In the dusk he was smiling to think that he might be able to manage without that assistance, with an effort. He felt confident—more confident than ever now—that he could get through and make a fortune. For he was young and of a sanguine disposition, and he liked fighting. Here was something to fight against at last—a contest from which he might emerge with some credit. Things had been too ridiculously easy for him so far: it was time to experience some of the caprices of Fortune. And here was the old man actually proposing to give him another hundred—when the family would have all they could do to live on what remained of his income. It was like him—just what might have been expected. Some men would have arisen and made a speech of noble self-abnegation, brimming over with lofty sentiments. Jack preferred to hide his emotions. He merely took his pipe

out of his mouth, after a few minutes' consideration, and announced his independence.

"Pooh!" he said. "I'm shot if I take a penny. I can manage, right enough. I had the offer of another young chap to coach for the navy the other day."

A sound as of low chuckling came from the darkness opposite. Sugden's spirits were rising: they could never stay depressed for long.

"I knew you'd say it, my boy. But I was a fool, and funk'd telling you. Yes, I positively funk'd it, and I've been holding it in all this time, fit to bust myself, and feeling sick as a dog all the while. Sick as ten dogs. Oh! I should have told you before, but there! I'm glad it's over, anyway."

"Well! if you had told me earlier, I might have saved a little more," said Jack, reflecting. "But I've been pretty careful. You see—there was Kitty."

"I know," put in the father simply. "That's what beat me. I thought it might knock you endways a bit. Well, things may get better in time."

"I suppose I ought to tell her—or the Colonel?" Jack spoke a little doubtfully. "We aren't supposed to correspond, you know. But she ought to know—in case it made any difference. It means a longer wait, I suppose. I want to do the square thing."

Sugden rose briskly from his chair. "Seems to me it's about time I did the square thing too," he said. "Yes, you'd better write to the Colonel and tell him all about it. Nothing like playing the straight game. And look at me now, preaching to others, a castaway! I never told your mother, Jack, nor Evy. Come along,

we'll repent and make amendment : then perhaps you'll hear me laugh again." He rolled out a rich laugh, did this remarkable man, as commentary on his words. "Come into the drawing-room and get it over. Why have we not more faith, I wonder ? We profess to believe in a God who provides us with our daily bread, and we lack courage to tell our family that we'll have to go slow a bit."

Evelyn, sitting in the next room, looked up at her mother and smiled.

"I thought Jack would do him good," she said. "Did you hear him laugh then ? There ! he's singing."

Mrs. Sugden nodded placidly as the two came in.

"What are you so pleased about ?" she asked. "We heard you laughing in the next room."

"And by all the rules of the game I should be crying like a two-year-old," said her cheerful husband. "But there ! I've been confessing, and confession's good for all of us sometimes. Mother, I should have told you before, but I kept it in—which was worse for me and you too. Old Hirst is giving up the farm at Michaelmas, and I can't get another tenant. I ought to have kept an eye on the old scoundrel, but I didn't—and he's worked the land out to the last farthing."

Mrs. Sugden desisted from her work for a moment and looked up at her husband with a smile. "Is that all ?" she asked quietly. "I never quite believed in Mr. Hirst, somehow."

"Look at her ! Did you ever see such a woman ? And she has not a word of abuse for me. My love,

don't you understand the enormity of my offence? We shall have to live on less than two hundred a year. The horse must go, and John, and the garden, and the servants. We shall have to scratch along with a cook, and Evy must make the beds. Evy! come and hit your old father, hit him hard somewhere. He has been a blind old fool. Why! bless me, what a family this is! She looks quite happy at the thought of it."

And in fact there was a light in his daughter's eyes as she came up and kissed him that had not been visible there for a long time. For Evelyn rejoiced in the prospect of being really useful, at last. Had she not longed for years to devote herself to the service of mankind, in some way or other? And now the chance had come—at home, as was best. "Father dear," she said, "I think it will be just delightful."

"Look at them! First Jack says it doesn't matter, and then Evy thinks it will be just delightful. Is this the way for a decent family to take their misfortunes? Faith! I'm surprised at ye. Mother, have ye not got a ha-ard wor-rd for the ould spaldeen?"

Evelyn clapped her hands delightedly. "There! he's talking Irish again."

"We shall have to be careful, dear," was all the mother of the family said. "Does Jack think he can manage?"

Jack cleared his throat. "Oh, I'm right as rain," he said, "with old Durrant to back me up, and a few pups now and then. He's a rare good sort is 'Durrant. I'm going to bring him down some day."

"We'll wire when there's anything to eat in the

house," said the incorrigible father, and exploded in a peal of laughter. Growing more serious, he kissed his wife gravely on the forehead. "It's almost worth while being ruined, after all, when a man has a family like this." He sighed. "Mother, it's a shame to ask you to scrape after all these years. But we'll pull through. When Jack's Lord Chancellor we'll go and stay with him sometimes and see what real luxury means. Evy, my child, shall you like rigid economy—with no new dresses?"

But Evelyn could see no terrors in the future. She could make her own dresses, with a little practice: she would do some of the cooking as well. She foresaw endless possibilities, innumerable outlets for her latent energy. Was she not also a Sugden, one of a fighting race who were ever at their best in times of misfortune? "I hope Jack will be able to manage," was all her thought at this moment. She looked round for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had slipped back into the study to finish his pipe, and to think over the substance of a letter to Colonel Girdlestone.

"I'm sorry about the servants," said Mrs. Sugden. "They'll all want to stay, I know. Perhaps we'd better keep Emma: she's a hard-working girl and strong, and she can cook a little." It was characteristic of the lady to waste no time in useless lamentation. Already she was forming her plans for the future: her active brain was ranging over the whole field of household expenditure, scheming retrenchment and reform. "If you could have told me a little earlier—" she began, but checked herself, for it was foreign to her nature to offer anything

like a reproach to her husband. She looked up at him and smiled, to show that no reproach was meant.

“My love, I was afraid of hurting you,” he said, smiling also. “Which only shows what an old fool I am—after all these years. It wasn’t because I didn’t trust you, but you know that. Evy! take care of your mother, or she’ll work herself to death.” He was gone: a sounding blast upon his nose echoed in the hall outside.

“A good woman is something to thank God for,” reflected the worthy parson. He stood still for a moment, his eyes closed. It was a way he had: he would stop sometimes in the street when a thought struck him, and offer up a silent prayer. Then he went briskly into the study again and filled another pipe.

CHAPTER XVI

LONDON in a November fog, damp, heavy, penetrating—a fog that gives promise of extending its baleful influence over whole weeks to come, rendering locomotion a matter of careful thought and inconceivable slowness, sending up gas bills to alarming proportions, causing pedestrians to cough and collide with one another in the streets—is not perhaps the most cheerful place in the world in which to carry on a stern fight against fortune. Over the Temple the dark brown pall hung fondly, touched into a dull redness here and there by a sturdy gas lamp, invisible until within a yard or so. Within doors lights were burning everywhere, but even with their aid the farther corners of each room were obscured in mist. It was not a day, nor a place, for extravagant cheerfulness. And yet the two men, sitting over the fire in Durrant's chambers, did not seem in any way oppressed by the intolerably dreary aspect of the world outside, where nothing was to be seen but a few bare twigs, shadowy in the murky gloom, visible only because they nearly touched the window. Why should they be melancholy? A good fire was burning in the grate; everything considered, they were reasonably com-

fortable. And Jack Sugden had planted his foot on the first rung of the ladder of fame. He sat there a full-fledged barrister—called but two days ago.

Alone he had done it. Or let us give all their due, and some of the credit to Durrant. For that rising barrister had certainly contributed not a little to his friend's success. When he came back from his expedition to Norway, and heard the news, he had behaved nobly. "Now I'm prepared to do something for you," he had said. "This is where we come in. Mind you, I think it's the best thing in the world to be left sitting without a penny, though I'm sorry for your people. You were a plutocrat before—a miser, saving money. Now you start as I did, on a firm and solid basis of poverty. There's nothing like getting down to the bed-rock, my son. Come and sit in my rooms, and I'll do my level best to see you through." So Jack translated himself from Blair's chambers in Lincoln's Inn to Durrant's in the Temple, and worked there free, gratis, and for nothing, incidentally assimilating Common Law, Equity, and the Law of Real and Personal Property, as set forth in the most admired text-books at the library. Concentration and a stout heart carried him through ; he scraped together the money for his fees, and the rest was—certain formalities and a dessert in the Benchers' Common Room. Edward John Sugden was duly published a barrister of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple.

To help a man forward, to become infected with a keen interest in his success, to be ever ready with suggestions and advice—all these things react even more

upon the mind of the giver than of the recipient. Should you wish to conquer some prejudice against a chance acquaintance, do him a kindness, and it is odds that you shall find that prejudice weakened. Durrant soon developed an almost paternal anxiety for the well-being of his *protégé*. He had done a good deal for him besides giving him the run of his chambers. It was through Durrant's exertions that Sugden had employed his spare hours (which were none too numerous) in the profitable task of coaching the son of a leading K.C. for entrance at a public school. It kept him pretty close at work, but it paid enough to allow Sugden to add a certain amount weekly to his banking account. For his expenses were not high now: you may be sure that very little was allowed for unnecessary luxury. And the excellent Durrant, being an unmarried man, living solitary in a Kensington flat, had actually offered his friend free quarters—at any rate for the present.

“I've an extra room there,” he had said, “and nobody to talk to in the evening. If you care to come in, it'll be doing me a kindness and may save you some money as well. Pay? My dear fellow, blood is thicker than water, and I'm a sort of cousin of yours, several times removed. I tell you I begin to want society. As to the food—we'll settle for that when you're married. You may expect to see me drop in on Mrs. Sugden for dinner once a week, at least.”

“But look here!” said Jack; “it's all very well, and awfully good of you, but you'll be seeing me all day. You'll get bored to death.”

But his mentor only laughed at the prospect. “I

don't put it before you as a permanent arrangement," he explained. "When I get bored I'll let you know—soon enough." So it came to pass that Jack transferred his few effects in a four-wheeler from Pimlico to the more salubrious neighbourhood of Campden Hill, whence he walked daily to the Temple and back for the sake of exercise, calling on his way to devote an hour to young Drummond, son of the eminent K.C., whom he was cramming with algebraical formulæ and the rudiments of Latin prose. Jack was no great hand at the classics himself, but he was not an unsuccessful teacher. It was his creed that a man of sound common sense could teach anything, with the aid of a text-book and half an hour's start of his pupil. I do not know that he was far wrong.

And on this foggy November afternoon, the two sat discussing future prospects, diverging on occasion into other topics, with the delightful inconsequence of intimates who can range freely over the whole gamut of conversation without fear of striking an inharmonious chord.

"How are the money bags holding out?" was Durant's first question. "It's a bit of a strain on them, this game. When I'd settled up for my show I had just a fiver to go on with."

Jack laughed. "I've run you uncommon close," he said. "I calculate to have seven pounds ten in hand when I've laid in the wig and gown. Then there's the circuit fee—that's five guineas, isn't it? Why is everything guineas in the law? It makes a difference, taken in bulk."

"It cuts both ways—as you'll find if you ever get a brief."

"It's my belief," said Jack, with due deliberation, "that a man doesn't get so far as this without getting further. So far I am a fatalist. If I hadn't been meant to make money at it I should never have got through."

"I see. It's a comfortable creed. Should have been glad of it myself—some years back."

"I don't go so far as to say that I'm a special ward of Providence, so to speak." Jack laughed. "But I don't believe I fell in love with that girl only to be disappointed in the end. And look at the luck I've had already. First, I come across you—well, all right, I won't dilate upon that point if you'd rather not. Then the old man loses his money."

"First-class luck, that!" put in the other, a trifle sardonically.

"Just that and no mistake. Nothing like it for testing your friends. And then I wrote to the Colonel, you know—her father. I had to let him know. He never answered me—I didn't much think he would—but he must have handed the letter on to her. I suppose he thought that would put a stopper on the business altogether. But I've told you before, haven't I?"

Durrant smiled gently. "Not more than half a dozen times. But go on! It's always pleasant to listen to young love's dream."

"Well! I never showed you the letter, anyway," pursued the unabashed lover. "By Jove, Durrant," he went on, his face lighted up with enthusiasm, "that girl's one in a—one in a million. It only wanted that.

If a man can't make his way with that letter in his pocket he must be an ass, a double distilled cur. I tell you it makes my blood tingle every time I look at it." His hand stole instinctively to his breast pocket to satisfy himself that the precious missive was still there. He fell into a reverie, gazing at the glowing coals.

"They all keep it there—with the photograph." Durrant addressed his words to the smoke-begrimed ceiling.

The word touched a chord in his companion's memory. He extracted a leather case from the pocket in question, opened it, and gazed at the contents.

"Oh, shut it up," cried the other in exasperation, half real, half pretended. "Look here, Sugden, it's not fair. I'm not engaged. I haven't got any photos on me. Put it away."

Jack replaced his treasure, unabashed. "Sorry, old man, I forgot. You'll get one some day, with luck. Though you won't get one quite like her. But there ! enough of that—I suppose we all talk in the same way, as though we had something to boast about, when it is all a sheer fluke. When I think how easily I might never have seen her—" He fell into silence again.

"It gives food for reflection," added Durrant. "As, for example, that it is better to be born lucky than wise."

"It was just a chance I took to Girdlestone at all," Jack mused, a smile of reminiscence round the corners of his mouth. "I didn't care for him a bit at first ; the other fellows thought him a bit of a smug, you know. When one comes to look back into it, it's ridiculous how

small a thing may change the current of one's whole life. It was just an accident. I happened to come in late for hall one night, and sat next him, because there was no room anywhere else. Then we got talking, and I found he was quite a decent chap. After that we got on with amazing rapidity."

"You would. There is something rather engaging about you. I think it must be your remarkable simplicity."

"Well, I believe in making friends if I get a chance," Jack admitted candidly. "What's the good of keeping aloof when you see a fellow like that? I grapple with him as soon as I can. It pays in the end—I haven't made many mistakes yet. The fact is, I believe there's something good in everybody if you only try to discover it."

"My amiable infant, that is no sort of creed for a successful barrister. You must learn to be blind of one eye—when you prosecute, at all events." Durrant rose slowly and stretched himself. "I must be getting home," he said, "if I can find my way in this blackness. You're not coming to-night, you say?"

"No; I'm dining with Fletcher, at Gatti's. He wants to celebrate the occasion. I shall be pretty late, I expect."

Durrant insinuated himself into a long overcoat. "And young Drummond takes an evening off, I suppose?"

"Yes; it's Saturday. Good-night—see you to-morrow." The door clanged behind Durrant, and Jack composed himself for an hour's comfortable meditation

in his chair. Left to himself, he felt at once and instinctively for the packet in his breast pocket, took out the letter, and read it through. It was his evening's recreation. So much is man the creature of habit that even actions dictated by some stress of emotion are apt after a while to become stereotyped, following one another in an orderly sequence. Different passages inscribed upon this flimsy sheet of paper met always with their own peculiar recognition. "I sometimes feel very lonely," she had written, "but I think of you, and it cheers me up wonderfully." At this point Jack invariably fell into a trance, and gazed into vacancy for about two minutes. "I shall never lose my faith in you," ran another passage. "I *know* all will come right in the end." This always infected him with such enthusiasm that he rose from his chair and paced up and down the room, uttering broken ejaculations suitable to the occasion. Then, having restored the letter to his pocket, he would sit down again, and think, and dream, and build his airy castles, until something roused him from that seductive employment and restored him to the hard realities of life.

What a sweet girl she was! The thought was an undercurrent to his nimble fancies, a steady ground-bass to the delicate embroidery of the imagination. Jack pictured to himself, as he sat there, the drawing-room at Ralston Manor, and the dainty little figure that used to come down before dinner, in that simple evening dress that became her so wonderfully, for a few minutes' conversation with him before the rest of the family appeared. How difficult it had been for him in those days—dense as he was and uninstructed in feminine ways—to say the

right thing ! He smiled to think how desperately he had struggled and how clumsily. If he could only have those chances over again, now ! Heavens, if he could only see her again, for one minute—alone !

And then that moment, when he had hardened his heart and followed her into the library, with the same sort of resolution that a hero might feel leading a desperate assault on some fortified stockade. He could see her now, standing by the book-shelves, with face half-averted, looking, as he thought, cold and clear-cut as a marble statue. He spoke—he stammered out his few broken sentences. What a fool he felt—what a fool he must have seemed to her ! And yet—miracle of miracles !—the marble was no lifeless stone after all, but warm, breathing, pulsing humanity, no whit less nervous (or so it appeared) than himself ; until, somehow, his arm was round her waist, her little head leaning back against his shoulder. Ah me ! how long ago it was since that memorable day.

Jack sighed. It was a luxury sometimes to be alone and to recall past happiness undisturbed. And the slight melancholy that tinged him in these rare moments of sentimental dalliance—that, too, was not unpleasing, taken in moderation. Dear little girl, she was waiting for him. She, who might surely choose where she would for suitors (unless the whole masculine world were suddenly stricken down with blindness), had elected to wait for him, with a sublime faith, a more than angelic constancy. Should he prove himself unworthy of the trust ? The thought stirred him mightily, so that he kicked out, quite involuntarily, with his right foot, repel-

ling the horrid accusation. A slight pause ensued in his reflections, while he anxiously examined the boot to see if it had sustained damage against the fender. Boots were infernally expensive things, anyway: a bootless barrister were but a sorry spectacle, and an unprofitable.

But he was going to make money. He pictured himself rising to address the jury in his first case. He lay back again in his chair and smiled, conjuring up the scene. But his thoughts would not be kept within the dusty confines of the law-courts. They turned back to those few words of farewell. Ah! now he was alone in the railway carriage, journeying to London. What was that book he held in his hand? “‘Wind-flowers,’ by Theodore March,” he read. By Jove! he had forgotten all about March; he had meant to go and look him up some day—only there was never time for anything. “I must find out his address,” he said to himself drowsily, “if only because She liked his book.” Was March making money? he wondered. He seemed to be getting on. Jack remembered dimly seeing a notice of a new book of his in one of the papers—“one of the most promising of the rising generation of poets,” or something of the kind. Well, if March could make money, so could he; it would be ridiculous to be outstripped by a fellow like that. He saw himself swaying juries with words of wondrous eloquence, while the crowded court hung upon his periods and the judge himself nodded grave approval from the bench. He concluded his peroration and sat down, amid a murmur of applause. The judge frowned, but the murmur swelled to a roar. Heavens! what a noise! Feet stamped, canes and

umbrellas battered the floor ; he blushed, beads of perspiration stood on his brow—it was too much. He distinctly heard the judge say angrily that His Majesty's Court of Law was not a theatre—but he might as well have spoken to the winds. It was too bad of them : he must rise and tell them to be quiet himself. He struggled to get up, but somebody was holding him down from behind ; he made a gigantic effort——

Ah ! it was some one knocking at the door. He must have fallen asleep in front of that fire. Why didn't Peters let him in ? Oh ! it was Saturday evening, and Peters had gone home ages ago. This must be Fletcher, come to fetch him out to dinner. Jack rose hastily, still a trifle dazed, and went to let him in.

“Gad ! I thought you must have gone off home,” said Fletcher, “and forgotten all about our little feed. Are you ready ?”

Jack pulled himself down from the skies to solid earth again, and went out into the murky night.

CHAPTER XVII

POSSIBLY owing to his theories on the subject of friendship, more probably because of an inherent amiability of character, Sugden's range of acquaintance in the great city grew wider with a steady persistency. Indeed, in London we must make friends or perish. The individual man, thrust suddenly into this vast whirling vortex of humanity, is terrified at the thought of solitude : he must find companions ; he must form his little circle ; he feels the need of some support other than his own native energy. For here is a huge congeries of companies, firms, associations, struggling each to win its way to a competence, and there must be moments when the stoutest hearted of solitary strivers recognises with a shiver his own insignificance, and thirsts for a word of encouragement from outside. For there is no solitude so appalling in its loneliness than that of the friendless worker in a crowd.

But Jack was sunny and enthusiastic and unsuspicious of evil, and he made new friends readily. He had come up to London with some advantages : he was known, at least by name, to most University men of about his own standing ; and he was never one of those who held aloof

from strangers. He talked freely enough, and you may be very sure that, being a Sugden, he was in no sense ashamed of the temporary scarceness of cash under which his family laboured. Like his father, he could make a jest of poverty—which indeed is by far the best manner in which to treat that so common condition. Thus handled, lack of money loses most of its terrors. It was not unamusing on occasion to hear Jack dilate before a select audience upon the advantages of a simpler life. He had learned a good deal since he had come to hand-grips with life ; he was no longer quite the dull, steady-going plodder that some had thought him in his Cambridge days. He had imbibed ideas, of a kind ; he had discovered a sort of gift for conversation ; he had, in short, blossomed out into something of a talker. For this, too, was necessary, and Jack Sugden had a steady eye on the future. His was to be a talking profession : he must educate himself therefore in the art of self-expression.

Some men develope late in life, to the mingled astonishment and envy of their friends. These are commonly the more solid in the end ; their reputation is the more surely founded : it rests on a securer basis. The precocious boy may, in rare instances, turn out a heaven-born genius, but far more often he sinks quietly enough out of sight. A few old women, who have known him as a child, continue to talk admiringly of his early exploits. The safer course is—not to arouse jealousy too young. It comes sufficiently soon in any case. The wise contrive to be considered amiable boys, but something dull ; when they rise to high positions in the State men who

have known them earlier shake their heads and say, "A good chap, but no head-piece—when we were at school together." A judgment of this kind is the sure crown and coping-stone of success.

Fletcher was a young man of means, who had just been called to the Bar with no intention of practising, but as a sort of preliminary canter before settling down on his home estates in Dorsetshire. It would give him, he explained, a sort of position in the county ; it was useful to know something of law ; and it was just as well to prove to a doubting family that he was not altogether a fool. Also, he expected to be made a J.P. Perhaps, grown old, he might become Chairman of Quarter Sessions.

"I may make a little splash in my own corner some day," he said modestly. "But there's one thing in my favour—I'm not going to compete with you fellows up here."

They drank to his future in very tolerable champagne.

"Well, we can manage without any more competition," said one of the company, drily enough to cause a laugh. "Here's Sugden, brimming with youth and energy. I'm open to put my money on him as the coming man."

Jack intimated that he was prepared to insure his prospects in the profession to a certain extent, given a reasonable time limit.

"Oh, are you Sugden ?" said his neighbour on the left, a rather slight, sallow-complexioned young man, who spoke slowly as though he considered words were valuable articles, not lightly to be wasted. " You rowed

in the boat, didn't you? I heard a lot about you the other day—March, the poet. Said he saw you down Fleet Street way. Couldn't get near you—you were in a hurry, apparently."

Jack turned, interested. "Do you know March? Then perhaps you can tell me where he lives. I've been thinking of looking him up a long time. What's he like now? Funny little beggar he used to be. I haven't seen him since we were at school together."

"So he said. He spoke of you as though you had been the one bright spot in that institution."

Jack laughed. "Poor little beggar," he said. "I'm afraid we were rather a rough crew, and he was not altogether in his element, at times. Poets are apt to get a bit bullied at school. How did you come to know him?"

"Oh! we're in the same line of business, more or less. I'm trying my hand at it, in a small way. My name's Templar—I was up with you for a year, I believe. St. Michael's."

They fell to discussing old days at Cambridge and common acquaintances among dons and undergraduates. "I didn't know many men at Mike's," said Jack, "except that giant of yours—Thurketyl his name was. Tremendous big fellow, with a broken nose. He's a lecturer now, or something. Went out to the war and came back wounded in the arm."

Templar smiled. "Yes, I know old Thurk pretty well," he said. "He's engaged to my sister."

"Give her my congratulations. He's a thundering good chap, I should judge, from what I know of him."

But look here ! How about March ? I've a good mind to go and look him up to-night. I may not get another opportunity for some time. Where does he live ? ”

“ Scrivener's Inn—No. 2—right up at the top. He's opposite Sargent—the man who wrote 'Travels in Two Hemispheres.' He's an interesting man, too.”

“ He ought to be. I read that book—one of the few books I've read this year, besides law-books, which I suppose you don't count. He's had some weird experiences, that man.”

“ Yes.” Templar gave a short, half-contemptuous laugh. “ It's funny to see how March has fastened on to him. It's a sort of fascination—I don't believe he likes him really—but Sargent's got a hold over him. He's strong, you see, and March isn't. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he's about as weak as they make them.”

Jack agreed, mindful of his schooldays. March had always been easily led, and his inclination was naturally towards the tortuous and crooked path—the common inclination of the weak. Nevertheless he felt a sort of kindness for the man—or boy. It was difficult to think of him as having arrived at man's estate. But Kitty liked his stuff, and she would like him to be befriended ; and from Templar's words he gathered vaguely that Sargent's influence might not be altogether beneficial to a weak mind. Yes, he would go and see him that very evening if he could find his way in the fog. Scrivener's Inn—he could look in on his way to the Tube, get in at Chancery Lane station, and be

back at Notting Hill Gate before midnight. It was an easy walk home from there.

"I'll come with you as far as Clement's Inn," said Templar. "That's where I'm keeping at present."

It was about ten o'clock when they got out into the Strand. The fog had lifted a little, but it was still misty enough to make it difficult to see more than a few yards ahead. Templar was better than his word: he piloted his companion to the end of a little side street and pointed up it. "That's the back entrance," he said. "The other's closed after nine. You ring the bell and ask for March, and the night-porter lets you in. Good-night! Remember me to March."

Sugden thanked him, said good-night, and walked on alone by the faint light of the dimly-shining gas lamps. As he approached the ornamental iron gates that guard the back entrance to Scrivener's Inn, he was conscious of footsteps behind him, uneven and rapid footsteps. He paused a moment, and turned round, thinking it might possibly be Templar coming after him with some message. The footsteps suddenly blundered, and there was the sound of a body falling on the pavement. Jack waited, listening for any sound of the man rising.

"Damaged himself, I take it," he reflected, when nothing further was audible. "Well, I suppose I must play the good Samaritan." He turned back, for to leave a fellow-creature lying on the pavement without assistance was not in his nature. "One of these days I shall get myself into a pretty mess," he thought as he retraced his steps with humorous resignation. "Here he is—face downwards in the gutter, poor beggar. Drunk, I sup-

pose." He bent down to listen for his breathing. The man was alive, anyhow—that was some comfort. Jack raised him tenderly from his uncomfortable position, and dragged him, limp and uncomplaining, to the nearest gas-lamp. A small, slight figure of a man, clean shaven, almost boyish in appearance. Blood was welling from a cut on the forehead, and he breathed stertorously. Jack propped him up against the lamp-post and examined his features curiously.

"Great heavens!" he said aloud in his astonishment. "If this isn't March himself, I'm a Dutchman."

Jack frowned in perplexity. It was surely March himself, hardly changed in appearance since he had last seen him, some five years ago. The same delicate, boyish features, the same slight, fragile build, the same weak, drooping, rather petulant mouth. Yes; it was March, without a doubt. Still, it was as well to make sure. There were letters in his pocket. Jack took one out and held it up to the light. Theodore March it was. He picked up the limp, bedraggled, bleeding body in his arms—it was no heavier than a girl—and bore it to the gate.

He rang the bell twice, but there was no answer. Then it occurred to him to try the gate itself. It was unlocked and yielded slowly to his hand. The night porter at Scrivener's was too wise to sit the night through in his little guard-room, waiting for chance visitors. Now and again he would leave the gate to take care of itself. It was massive in appearance, and did not open easily, but dwellers in the Inn respected their guardian's habits, and were careful to test the gate before ringing

the bell. Jack went through, carrying his burden in his arms, and felt his way along the outer court, catching sight of a number here and there over a doorway by the struggling light of a chance gas-lamp. No. 2 must be in the other court. He felt his way through a pitch-dark archway, and emerged into a quadrangle paved with cobbles, rather trying to the feet. He blundered up against a wooden seat encircling a tree, to the detriment of his shins, before he discovered the paved flagstones again. The few glimmering lights seemed far away ; they showed like faint blurs of yellow in the darker fog.

Ah ! here was the staircase, and a lamp directly opposite the number. He could discern dimly March's name on the side of the arched doorway. Some instinct of home-coming seemed to affect the clouded mind of the poet : he stirred uneasily and murmured incoherent words. Jack set him down for a moment at the foot of the stairs, raised him again in an easier position, and began his climb.

"A curious way of renewing an old acquaintance," he thought to himself as he mounted slowly up the narrow wooden staircase. Outlying portions of March's anatomy came into contact with the more abrupt corners, and he began to revive. Stray words came from his lips, intelligible now, but unbecoming. He uttered strange oaths. Sugden, exhausted but triumphant, laid him on the floor of the top landing. March's outer door was closed, but the opposite one was open. KENNETH SARGENT was the simple legend on the lintel.

"It might be better to call him in," reflected Jack.

“Otherwise—I may be had up as a burglar.” He rapped stoutly at the door. A tall man, with a bronzed, bearded face, and remarkably blue eyes, opened it with an irritable air.

“Well, what’s up now?” he began, and stopped abruptly on seeing the figure on the floor. “I apologise.” He laughed. “I thought it was my tame poet. Ah! he’s on the floor, is he? This is what comes of pouring old wine into new vessels. I didn’t think the little beggar had it in him to get as drunk as all that.” He bent over him. “Whiskey,” he said, reflectively, “and, I should say, Irish. Also a scratch on the forehead—fell against the kerb.” He rose suddenly and addressed Sugden with engaging frankness. “How about that? Is my diagnosis correct, or have I lost the trick of it?”

“Admirable—as far as I can judge.” Jack could not help laughing at the other’s gay carelessness of manner. “I was coming up to see him, and found him lying outside the gate. Is he much damaged, do you think?”

“Physically—no! Morally—that depends on how you look at it. Mentally—well, it may be the making of him,” said this remarkable stranger. “We will put him to bed first and discuss the bearings of the case subsequently.” He felt in the poet’s pocket and produced a latchkey, opened the door, and struck a match. “Fetch him in,” he called cheerily. “Stick him in that chair. We’ll do him to rights now we’ve got him.” He brought in a basin and sponge, fetched a kettle from his room, and bathed the wound with a practised hand. March opened his eyes and looked round vacantly. “What’s matter?” he inquired weakly.

“You sit quiet, my boy,” said Sargent cheerfully. The poet closed his eyes again obediently, and made no further comment on the proceedings. Going into his room again, Sargent returned with some lint, a roll of strapping, and a pair of scissors. “Nothing like making a professional job of it,” he explained. “There! now he’s fixed up for the night.”

“Why, are you a doctor?” asked Jack, in surprise at the deftness of his manipulation.

The other scrutinised him quizzically from beneath bent eyebrows. “And who are you, any way?” he asked in return, smiling. “Are you a friend of the patient, or a nameless adventurer?”

Jack smiled in return. He began to conceive a liking for this resourceful and candid stranger. “My name’s Sugden,” he said simply.

“Ah!” The speaker paused for a moment in his task of removing March’s boots. “Not Sugden of the Cambridge boat?”

“That’s me all right,” Jack admitted, ungrammatically.

“Ah! I’ve heard of you before.” Sargent made a curious grimace. “There! now he’s settled; come in to my den and have a talk. You won’t get anything out of this little wreck till to-morrow evening, at the earliest. I like your face,” he added frankly. “Can you talk?”

“I’ll try,” said Jack, with a laugh. “And I read your book the other day.”

Sargent chuckled. “You’ll do,” he said. “There’s the root of the matter. Come to the point at once.

Nothing like telling an author you've read his book. Oh, we're a mangy crew, we writers. We sit and stew in our own juice, and subsist on press cuttings and occasional flattery. We're all alike—creatures of a hypertrophied vanity. You should hear that little owl of a poet whom we've just put to bed. Come along; sit down and smoke. Have a whiskey and soda?" He took Sugden by the arm and led him into the room opposite, shutting March's door behind him. "Heavens! but it's good to see a man again. You don't write, by any chance, I trust?"

"No; not even letters, if I can help it. I've no time for composition."

"Thought not—you look too healthy. Try one of these cheroots. Say when!"

He poured out whiskey with a liberal hand.

"Easy all!" cried the visitor.

"There's a syphon on the table," said the host. "Fill up to taste. And now we'll talk. I've hardly spoken to a living soul, bar poets and other idiots, for the last month. Man, we'll make a night of it."

It was thus that Jack Sugden met Sargent Henderson, under a changed name and in changed conditions, for the first time, and was just a little surprised, perhaps, at the warmth of his reception.

CHAPTER XVIII

THEODORE MARCH had gravitated to London as naturally and inevitably as Newton's famous apple fell to the earth, drawn irresistibly by the attraction of Fleet Street and Paternoster Row. He had always meant to write ; he had dreamed of it in his unhappy schooldays ; he had schemed it out many times as he lay curled up in a corner of the school library (where he spent more time than was good for his bodily health burrowing among the treasures of ancient literature) ; and at Oxford he had already begun to try his wings in longer and wider sweeps around his poetic domain. There he had written "Persephoné"—a poem of some merit, if too frankly imitative ; "Andromeda"—a drama in blank verse after the Greek model, and a whole host of shorter lyrics, sufficiently remarkable for a young man not yet in his twenty-first year. There was, in these earlier works, a certain restraint and gravity admirable in their own way. March had the classic touch ; he was steeped in the literature of Greece ; his muse had not yet freed herself from the shackles of scholarship, but she moved in her fetters with a grace and decorum very gratifying to the educated mind. But as yet she shone

but faintly, a pale moon reflecting the beams of stronger luminaries. The poet had not drawn upon himself; he had not dived deep and fished up pearls from his own inner consciousness. It would have required a diver of Delos. Yet somewhere within him there lurked strange thoughts that might flower in due time.

March polished and refined, refined and polished again, until the pages of his manuscript book were almost illegible. Then he copied his work into a new volume, and selected and arranged about thirty poems, which he published at his own expense with a small London house. For the boy had money—some six hundred a year of his own when he should come of age—and a tolerant guardian. He had been left an orphan just before leaving school. This volume was “Songs from Arcady,” and it has now a certain value among collectors, for it sold about forty copies only, and the rest were withdrawn and destroyed by the author (perhaps wisely) after the publication of “Wind-flowers” had brought him a certain reputation in the literary world. For there were symptoms in this second book, published soon after the poet’s arrival in London, of an awakening into life, of a rebellion against formality and convention, of a soul that was beginning to grope in the darkness and feel for itself, instead of expressing the thoughts of others. True, there was not much of this, but there was something. The old and classic restraint was still visible, but beneath it was possible to imagine a few smouldering embers that might burst into flame. “Wind-flowers” was well reviewed, and sold more than respectably. It contained certain love poems handled with a tenderness that appealed

particularly to feminine sympathies. Ladies bought the little volume and wept over it. So powerful is the poetic alchemy than can transmute base metal to gold.

The material upon which it had to work, it may be conceded, was hardly of the finest. It was towards the end of his second year that March became acquainted with Falconer of Corpus—a young man who had some reputation as a witty speaker at the Union, and as something of a firebrand in his own college. He, too, had leanings towards literature, had read Shelley, and accounted himself a free thinker in love and religion ; he had also (which was a point of some importance with March) a fine physique, and had come near getting his colours for the hundred yards—a man, altogether, whom the undergraduate element held in some esteem. He had deigned to call on the author of “Songs from Arcady” when that little volume made its appearance, and March had been flattered and impressed. The two became intimate, in a way : they came to spend a good many of their evenings together in debate upon things in general, and in Falconer’s rooms the weaker vessel soon learned to appreciate the value of spirits as an inspirer of brilliant conversation. He learned also the more subtle intoxication of freedom in talk—the daring delight of assuming the supremacy of the intellect, the sacredness of the passions. Falconer had the name of being a loose liver ; his acolyte would fain follow him in the glorious path of liberty, could he but find the way. To do him justice, he tried hard enough, and he had the faculty of imagination. He began to fancy himself in love—with a young lady of doubtful age and still more

doubtful morals, who received the addresses of her admirers behind the counter of a tobacconist's shop in the High. To her, secretly, he indited some of the more passionate of those poems.

There was no harm in this. March—one of the shyest of men—would certainly never have ventured to address the woman of his own initiative. But he talked to his friend, and Falconer thought it a huge jest, and flattered the little fool and praised his verses, and one day—much to March's confusion—took him into the shop under the pretext of wanting some cigars and introduced him to the lady as one of her most fervent admirers. "He writes poems to you," said the mischievous ruffian, and what more natural than that she should wish to see these effusions? The poet, bold enough in the seclusion of his own room, began a correspondence, which led to certain meetings, which again led in due time to a summons before the college authorities. The matter might have been adjusted even then, but March was inflamed with a desire to pose as a hero and martyr: there was no question of personal chastisement: he had begun to conceive his genius wasted in the dull round of academic studies; and he replied insolently to the questions addressed to him. He was sent down, and London received one poet more—a poet much inclined to brag of his adventures with the sex (so far his adventures had been innocent enough), and firmly convinced in his own mind that his name would long be cherished in the classic groves he had quitted as an apostle of Liberty. His guardian—good, easy man—troubled himself about this trifling incident no more than if his ward had barked

his shins against a coal-scuttle. "Mad! quite mad!" he explained to his friends with a shrug of the shoulders. What could be expected from a boy who had already published a book of verse? "All these poets are mad as hatters," the cheery fellow would add, with a laugh; and, tapping his forehead significantly, indicate that there was a distinct strain of insanity on the mother's side.

And so March settled down in Scrivener's Inn, and wrote more verses, and polished them with the jealous care of an artist (for the man was an artist), and discovered at last a publisher who was prepared to risk a little money. "Wind-flowers" came out, nicely got up and tastefully bound, and March began to scrape acquaintance with his fellows in the trade—other men who had published other little volumes of verse. Soon a coterie was formed, a little circle for the purpose of mutual flattery—a club of young men who imagined themselves to represent a sort of literary Bohemianism, who cultivated long hair and a rapt expression of countenance, and met in each other's rooms once a week to read their latest effusions and hold high discourse upon the noblest of the arts. March became the leader of this gathering, which attained to an ephemeral importance in its day. Union is strength, even in the domain of minor poetry, and a coterie of verse-writers (the majority of whom are also reviewers), all prepared to sing each other's praises loyally upon the slightest opportunity, cannot fail to impose their opinions upon a certain section of the public.

Two years of this amiable society, and the publication of two more books, had raised Theodore March to an

established position among the poets of the day. His volumes actually paid—not very much, it is true, but then the poet was a man of means. He was of age now, and in possession of an income amply sufficient to provide him with the necessaries—even with most of the luxuries—of bachelor life. His rooms were small, but comfortably furnished ; the walls were lined with books in elegant bindings ; over the mantelpiece were three or four prints of considerable value. Yet March was something of a recluse, even of an ascetic, in his habits. Sometimes he would shut himself up in his room for days together, refusing to see any one, only stealing out in the evening to dine at some neighbouring tavern. This was when the fever of composition held him : at such times the stranger, passing the Inn gate at about nine in the evening, might behold a slight, weakly figure emerge, a wave of dark hair falling over his pale forehead, his eyes fixed upon the ground. There was something rather striking in the delicately chiselled features. The few diners at so late an hour stared curiously at the table where he sat, now and again brushing back, with an air of weary resignation, that falling wave of hair from his eyes. There may have been a touch of consciousness in his pose. He looked the poet. Sometimes his lips moved softly, as though repeating divine harmonies.

And then there came the day when he first met Kenneth Sargent.

He knew the name already, for “Travels in Two Hemispheres” had appeared serially in one of the magazines before publication in book form, and had attracted notice from the keen incisiveness of its style as

well as from the variety of strange adventures it recorded. When March saw the new name painted over the door opposite he decided at once that it would be worth while to make the new comer's acquaintance. As it happened, however, it was Sargent who called upon him, the second day after he arrived, to borrow a tumbler.

"Come in and have a drink," he said. "I've got some tolerable whiskey, but nothing to mix it in. Come and join me, and we'll take two glasses."

There was something a little brusque about his manner, certainly. March, who was the most sensitive of men, recoiled instinctively from this free and easy address. But he reflected that it was always as well to be on friendly terms with a near neighbour, and the man was interesting in himself. He followed him across the passage. They sat and talked together for perhaps an hour, and March returned to his own room in a sort of maze, hardly knowing what to think about this new comer who seemed alternately to fascinate and repel him —to fascinate him by the sense of reserve force behind his light and easy conversation, as of a man who thought for himself and stood by himself, careless of support from his fellows ; to repel him by a suggestion of coarseness, almost brutality, from which the finer, more effeminate nature of the poet shrank timorously. Also he was uneasily conscious that Sargent did not hold his calling in any very great respect.

"You're the poet, I suppose," he had said, with almost a touch of patronage in his voice.

Yet it may have been fancy. He spoke politely enough : it was evident that he had heard of March's

work. But there was no flattery in his manner. He did not approach the poet (as the poet was now accustomed to be approached) with any sort of reverence : he did not seem greatly impressed when March, warmed with whiskey, delivered an eloquent criticism on the condition of modern letters. His blue eyes had a directness of gaze that was something discomposing to a self-conscious talker. It was later that he began to speak open blasphemy against Art.

For the fascination was stronger than the repulsion, and it became the common thing for this strangely assorted pair, to meet in the evenings. It was March who sought the other, attracted almost against his will by an indefinable hunger for Sargent's society. It grew upon him : the man was something so different from the little breed of diseased, effeminate scribblers with whom he commonly consorted. And the feminine element in March himself, always apt to overpower the masculine, always ready to worship strength from afar, drew him irresistibly onwards to surrender. He must give himself up to this new guide. It was Falconer over again, but a stronger, a more matured leader than the Corpus undergraduate.

Henderson, for his part—let us revert once more to the more familiar name—was glad enough to find any one with whom to converse in this solitude. He had reasons of his own for desiring to conceal his identity—reasons of the best, which had induced him to grow a beard and change his name and take these rooms in an obscure corner of the great city. Sargent Henderson, the roving doctor of medicine, was dead and buried,

medical diploma and all. Or to be accurate, dead but not buried, vanished from the gaze of man in the Australian bush. Kenneth Sargent, author and journalist, reigned in his stead, not much seen of his fellow-men, an author who shrank from the fierce light of publicity, belonged to no literary set, and had repulsed more than one would-be interviewer with scant politeness. But solitude was very little to his liking, and a poet was interesting as a study of character. It amused him to watch the colossal vanity of the little man, who yet held somewhere within him a spark of the divine fire, and could talk (when he forgot himself for the moment) with the tongue of an angel. It amused and perhaps flattered him to note how easily he acquired an ascendancy over the poet's mind. He began to expound strange views of life, and smiled grimly to see them assimilated with startling rapidity. For Henderson was not the Henderson of old : he was a ruined man : his career was gone ; and it was not surprising if he had become a little soured and cynical.

“ How can a man expect to be a great poet unless he has lived ? ” was one of his favourite arguments. Can a field produce anything worth growing unless it is broken up, ploughed and harrowed ? “ Before you do anything great,” he would sometimes tell March, “ you, too, must be broken up and harrowed. Heavens ! man, you must learn what life means, you must feel, you must have experience. Go out and see what vice means, and misery ; run through the gamut of human emotions. Here you sit and write poems about love. What do you know about love ? ”

Then March, his vanity getting the better of him, prated fatuously of Oxford and the fair tobacconist: hinted dark experiences. Henderson laughed sardonically.

“Pooh!” he said. “I’ll bet a dollar nothing happened. You’re as innocent as a chicken in the egg. No! you want education, my son: here you are, with your fine high-flown theories about getting rid of convention and formula, and I doubt if you’ve ever so much as kissed a girl.”

March, who had been drinking whiskey, and was nearing the sentimental mood, put in an eloquent plea for transcendental purity.

“It’s the business of a poet to know life,” repeated Henderson, unmoved. “If you went out and got solidly drunk, and spent the evening at a music hall, and turned up here at four in the morning, I might begin to have real hopes of you.”

“It is a poet’s task to cultivate lofty inspiration and high ideals,” argued the poet, rather thickly. “He must keep his soul unstained, unsmirched by any dealings with sordid vice. I aim at making the race higher and nobler; the essence of a true poem is that it should contain some touch of noble aspiration.”

Henderson shrugged his shoulders. “The only poems worth a cent,” he replied, “have been written by men who knew what they were talking about. Never mind! you’ll learn some day.”

And that foggy night when Sugden found the poet’s limp body lying on the pavement and carried it through the silent court to his rooms marked an epoch in March’s progress—an early step in his education according to the new scheme.

CHAPTER XIX

IN the intervals of a strenuous life—for Sugden was not the man to allow his enthusiasm to cool down after the attainment of an initial success—Jack found time to pay occasional visits to the little colony at Scrivener's Inn. He was making a start in his profession ; he had joined the Midland Circuit, and his first brief was already a thing of the past—a pleasant memory. For every one in the county knew the busy Rector of Stourton, and those who knew him could not help having a kindness for the resolute optimist. Cases from the Fleckney district at Quarter Sessions, one or two more serious charges committed to the assizes, came his way through Frere and Rideal, the old-established firm of solicitors in that growing town. They did not bring in much money, it is true, but they gave him a start, and served to pay the costs of travelling, leaving a little over sometimes for other purposes. And in London he worked steadily at anything that came his way, taking pupils in law or in mathematics (he was acquiring quite a reputation as a coach), “devilling” for Durrant when his friend had more work on hand than he could manage comfortably.

“It’s good for you to get experience,” said that invaluable man. “But I confess it makes me tired to look at you. Well! if you *must* do something else, get up that case. I’ve got to go over to the Courts.”

“I’m going to pay you out somehow,” Jack would reply, laughingly. “If you won’t let me pay rent, I’ll do my best to work it out.”

“You forget your people put me up when I went down for Sessions last time,” Durrant protested.

“I know, my boy. I wired them to kill any fatted calf they could find in the village. What did they feed you on—bread and milk or porridge?”

“I’d go there if they fed me on stewed snails,” said Durrant with conviction. “Your father’s a man after my own heart. I see where you get it all from now, you ruffian. You’re a fraud after all; you couldn’t help being a decent chap with a father like that. And Mrs. Sugden is an angel.”

“Heavens! I blush for my parents.” Jack had a mischievous desire to pursue the subject a little further, but refrained. He had just a shadowy suspicion about the true source of Durrant’s enthusiastic appreciation of Stourton hospitality. He noticed that his friend had a tendency to hover round the subject himself: sometimes in the evenings after dinner he would turn the conversation towards sentiment, and actually encourage Jack to talk of his own engagement—if it could be called by that name.

For it was spring now, and what was more, Kitty was coming up to town. Young Girdlestone had mentioned it casually in a letter a week ago. “She is staying with

Mrs. Fleming," he said, and gave the address—Kensington Park Gardens. "I told her," added the ingenuous youth, "if she wanted any one to take her to a matinee or anything of that kind, that you were living in town and might not mind sacrificing yourself for once in a way. So don't be surprised if you get a letter from Mrs. Fleming some day. I hope you won't mind. Girls are a bit of a nuisance, but they have to be looked after, and Mrs. F. has a growing family." It may be imagined that Jack was considerably amused at the receipt of this communication. The secret had been well kept in the Girdlestone family, but no doubt the kindly brother had a vague idea that there was something between them. Or else Kitty had managed him with extraordinary cleverness. But then she always had been a remarkably clever girl.

Now he thought of it, too, he remembered that there had been a Mrs. Fleming staying at Ralston Manor the first time he had been there. So he was not altogether surprised to receive one morning a letter in a strange hand, addressed to his rooms at the Temple, and signed Emily Fleming.

"Dear Mr. Sugden," it ran, "I have only just discovered that you are living in London. It would give us great pleasure if you could come and dine with us some evening this week. We shall be just a family party. Miss Girdlestone—the youngest—has come up to stay with us for a few days. Thursday or Friday would suit us equally well."

Jack tossed the letter over to Durrant.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

Durrant perused it with corrugated brows.

"I think it seems remarkably friendly," he pronounced judicially.

"Yes ; but do you think I ought to go ? There was nothing said about casual meetings, you know—but still. Well ! hang it, I can't decline very well."

"Decline ? My dear infant. Look here now, do you know what I'd do if I were in your place ? Bless my soul, you're of age, and she's of age, and you both love each other. I'd run off with her and marry her out of hand."

"And live on the charity of kind friends," put in Jack with a laugh. "Durrant, I'd no idea you had the makings of such a fiery lover in you."

"If I were as much in love as you say you are," said the other, "I'd have some understanding at any rate. What's the father to you, anyway ? What is he to her, by your account ? A poor sort of parent as far as I can make out. No ! my boy—you go to this Mrs. What's-her-name, and make the best of your time there. Why ! you haven't seen the girl for how long ? Three years, is it ?"

It may be some reflection on the influence of the law, as a profession, upon the moral nature of man, but Jack gave up the point without a serious struggle.

"I don't know that I think it's justifiable," he said, "but I believe you're right, on the whole. I should be a fool not to go."

So he wrote back and accepted for the Thursday, and was in such a condition of nervous excitement all that morning and afternoon that the two law pupils whom he

was instructing in Durrant's back room at the Temple reaped very little real profit out of their two hours' work. For he was really going to see her again, after all this time, and he could scarcely believe that it was true. His mind refused to picture the meeting—in another house, and before comparative strangers. He would have to be cold, and formal, and polite. He must look only, and not touch—as though she were some valuable specimen in a museum. And he must not even look too much, or what would the Flemings think?

He went there in a tremor, though nobody could have called Jack Sugden a nervous man. He smiled at his own folly as he stood on the doorstep and rang the bell.

“It's nearly as bad as beginning all over again,” he said to himself, and sighed, for he felt an oppression of the chest. He entered the drawing-room, conscious that his face was a fiery red, and shook hands with the two ladies, scarcely knowing what he was doing. Fleming was not there.

“I am so sorry,” murmured the apologetic hostess. “Teddy will be so distressed to miss you. He wires to say he won't be back till late—important business. So like these men, isn't it?” She laughed.

Jack thought he could do without Teddy, if that was his silly name, quite surprisingly well. He began to recover himself, and raised his eyes to look at Kitty. The provoking girl was openly smiling at his confusion. It made him feel better to see her smile; the sense of strangeness wore off a little; it established a sort of freemasonry between them. He expressed an

amiable hope that Mr. Fleming was not overworking himself.

Yes ; it was much better being alone with them. He blessed the strenuous Teddy in his heart, and took upon himself the task of entertaining the two ladies to the best of his ability. His spirits rose every moment ; he talked through dinner with an ease and brightness that surprised himself. And it was a good dinner, with more than tolerable wine : it produced a certain effect upon his mind : he began to view the future through a beautiful roseate haze, like the glorious sunset he had beheld over Kensington Gardens as he drove home to change for dinner. From the top of that lumbering red-painted conveyance he had seen the huge stacks of pretentious architecture, even the bare scaffolding and cranes of the new buildings that were rising behind the Palace Hotel, touched with an unearthly glory. Sometimes, in his calmer moments, the details of a barrister's life seemed sordid and mean—early Victorian architecture by daylight. Now for the moment, in the misty light of a waning dinner, they too reflected a fairy-like beauty.

Between him and his hostess uprose a beneficent centrepiece, adorned with flowers. On his left She sat, almost within arm's length. Screened by the merciful decoration he could look at her unperceived. He did look ; he scarcely lost a precious moment ; he feasted his eyes, and the blood ran riotously in his veins. It was a merry dinner. The trio laughed joyously on the slightest provocation. What the solemn butler might think of his conduct he did not care. His brain sang with the strong wine of Love. They had met again, and he had

barely touched her hand. The thought was intolerable.

“I will kiss her before I go,” he swore to himself, “if I outrage all the proprieties in Christendom.”

Durrant was right: there must be an end of this. Why should he waste any more time in deference to the fiat of a retired colonel? He had been a boy then; now he was a man, and making his way. They were both of age: they could marry if they chose. Yes; there must be no more of this ridiculous separation. If only he had a little more money! He sighed ruefully, in momentary forgetfulness.

“Mr. Sugden,” laughed his hostess, with a reproachful inflection.

“I was reflecting that even the pleasantest evenings cannot last for ever,” explained the gallant barrister, with ready inspiration.

“You must come here again, if you are so polite as to pretend you enjoy it.”

Kitty’s eyes met his, and he accepted the invitation so readily that they all laughed.

Sugden considered whether he could risk an entertainment of his own. On reflection, he decided that it had better wait. He might want the money for more important purposes.

The ladies rose. Mrs. Fleming produced a box of Teddy’s cigarettes. But Jack refused absolutely to be left alone.

“I’ll come with you, if I may,” he said. “I smoke more than is good for me already.” He followed them into the drawing-room.

"Teddy will be back soon," said Mrs. Fleming. "He will be delighted to have a cigar with you before you go."

Mentally Jack consigned the absent Teddy to perdition. For he was on fire now—all his shyness had vanished long ago; and he wanted to take the girl in his arms. If he did not get a chance soon he would outrage all the conventions. He debated seriously whether he should not explain his position to Mrs. Fleming before her husband returned. She seemed a good-natured little woman. As a sort of compromise he occupied a strategic position close to Kitty's chair.

The solemn butler brought in coffee, and they drank. How time went! And that man might be coming back any minute now. Jack was in a sort of fever; he listened with strained ears for the sound of a latchkey in the door; he could hardly keep still. Suddenly a sound stole upon his consciousness—a thin, strained note, long drawn out, that seemed to proceed from some immense distance. He wondered what it could signify, in idle curiosity, not imagining for a moment that in that remarkable sound lay anything to his own advantage. But Mrs. Fleming rose hurriedly.

"Please excuse me one minute," she said. "Nurse has gone to her supper, and I hear baby—I must fly."

She flew—or made as near an approach to flying as could be expected of a stoutish lady of three-and-thirty. Jack had barely time to open the door for her. He closed it carefully. Next moment—but is it necessary to say more?

"I will never let you go again," he said, after perhaps

a minute had passed, a minute of delirious ecstasy. "Oh, but it was worth waiting for!" He sighed, content: she sighed in happy unison upon his shoulder. "Kitty, darling! was it not worth it?" His veins throbbed madly; he scarcely knew what he was saying; but she was in his arms once more.

"I did so hope he would wake up soon," murmured Kitty. "I was waiting for it: it always happens just after dinner."

They laughed and sat down side by side on the sofa, forgetful of all the world outside their own two selves.

Jack, with an air of immense resolution, attacked the problem at once.

"I have made up my mind," he said. "It's absurd to suppose we are to go on waiting like this for ever, not seeing each other. Kitty—there must be a limit, dearest."

"Yes, dear! Oh! isn't it nice being together again?"

"You sweet little darling!" A pause. "But she'll be down again in one minute. We must talk sense. I mean—we must fix a date."

"Yes, Jack dear," said the obedient angel. "What for?"

"Marriage!" he replied, with admirable firmness.

"Oh, Jack!" she laughed. "And we are not even engaged yet—at least, not a real engagement—are we?"

"You shall have a ring to-morrow. I'm not going to conceal anything any longer. We are both of age now, my pet."

Another pause.

"It will be lovely," she sighed. "But oh ! I am—just a little—frightened."

She nestled closely to him—a wholly delightful gesture, he thought. Who would not be a protector of youth and beauty ?

"Darling ! I wish I could carry you off and marry you out of hand. If I only had a little more money ! Well, perhaps it won't be so very long. What can we manage on, do you think, to begin with ?" He sighed. "What selfish beasts we are, we men !"

"I am just as selfish. I want you all for myself. Jack dear, I wish—I wish I knew more about these things. I'm afraid I shall be such a bad housekeeper." She looked up at him so sadly for a moment that Jack was compelled to waste a few more precious moments in silent reassurance.

"You will be the best housekeeper in the world !" he declared with enthusiasm. "Look here, Kitty darling, we'll put the limit at two years—no ! one year. Hang it all—I'm not going to wait any longer than that, whatever happens ! And if I'm not making enough at the Bar I'll chuck it up. Will you live with me in a cottage, if the worst comes ?"

She would live with him anywhere, she said. A cottage would be lovely—if there were not too many other cottages all about.

"Well, we'll go and farm the old man's glebe," he laughed.

A strange voice intruded suddenly upon their conversation. "I beg your pardon," it said apologetically.

A gentleman in a frock-coat was visible in the doorway. Jack was on his feet, a trifle discomposed for the moment. Then he held out his hand, with a laugh.

“ May I introduce myself ? ” he said. “ My name’s Sugden—and—Miss Girdlestone and I are engaged to be married ! ”

CHAPTER XX

THE fortnight or so that Kitty Girdlestone spent in town at the hospitable house in Kensington Park Gardens was a remarkably crowded time for our young friend at the Temple. On the whole, too, it was a very pleasant time, as these crowded periods in our lives are apt to be, at all events in the retrospect. Jack Sugden had his own work to do, which obviously could not be neglected ; but none the less he contrived to spend a good many spare hours with Kitty. Also there were certain other matters to which he must attend. The engagement ring was a serious subject, involving considerable debate in his mind between conflicting prudence and generosity. The price of these trifles struck him as ridiculous. But after all, engagement rings were not a matter of current expense. They were, or should be, a permanent possession ; their value did not deteriorate appreciably by lapse of time ; it was worth while, in short, to secure a good specimen even if it meant a little pinching subsequently. With such arguments he persuaded himself into spending an amount of money that caused him to shiver with apprehension in

his calmer moments. He chose diamonds. Ten guineas was the figure.

“There are some occasions when money comes in useful,” he informed his long-suffering companion, after rejecting his advice to take a pearl ring at half the price. “This is one of them. I should have liked to make it fifty.”

“Do you seriously imagine,” Durrant grumbled, “that it makes the slightest difference? I call it reckless extravagance! She’d probably prefer the pearls.”

Jack explained that pearls went black. The jeweller had told him so. Diamonds lasted for ever—on the same unbiassed authority.

“Which is more than your banking account will do,” put in his friend. “Well, you must do as you please. I suppose we’re all equally foolish on these occasions.”

So the diamond ring was bought and found to fit admirably, and altogether looked so satisfactory in its proper position that Kitty almost forgot to think of the sort of welcome she would receive on returning home. For Jack had written to tell the Colonel, only that enthusiastic golfer being then engaged upon one of his spring tours of the southern links, never received the letter until he came back a fortnight later. Perhaps it was as well that he did not get it earlier, or he would infallibly have recalled his errant daughter and spoiled an enjoyable holiday.

One of the last expeditions Kitty Girdlestone and her indefatigable chaperone made was to Scrivener’s Inn, where they had tea in March’s rooms. For Jack had

told her of his early acquaintance with the poet, and she was still young enough to be enthusiastic over the personality of a man who had actually published books of verse.

“ Could you bring him to call ? ” she asked. “ I should so like to see him.” And Jack had suggested as an alternative that he would get March to ask her and Mrs. Fleming to tea. For Scrivener’s Inn was an interesting old place, visited daily by curious Americans. Dr. Johnson had lived there—so tradition held—and in the very rooms that March now occupied.

“ He’s a funny little chap,” said Jack, “ and about as vain as a peacock. If I say you’re an admirer of his work he’ll want to entertain the whole family.”

He had his own reasons as well for wishing the poet to see something of Kitty. Since the night on which he had renewed his acquaintance with March outside the back entrance of the Inn he had seen a good deal of the curious pair who occupied the top rooms of No. 2 staircase, and had come to the not unnatural conclusion that Sargent’s influence over March was not good for that young man’s character and morals. It was obvious that March was on the down grade : he must pull up short, or his life would be ruined. And Jack Sugden was not the man to see an old acquaintance go to the bad without an effort to save him. He had his gospel to preach also, a gospel very different from that of Sargent Henderson. He preached health and abstinence and the Christian virtues ; he had his own opinions as to the ideals towards which a poet should strive, and they did not lie in the direction of too close an acquaintance with

the sordid vices of life. To his simple mind it seemed that nothing could be better for March than the sight of a girl like Kitty Girdlestone.

And March was ready enough to listen to him when they came together. It was characteristic of the poet that he leaned always to the stronger side, whether its influence lay in the direction of good or evil. With Sugden close at hand his mind took on the more healthy colours ; he regarded life from a different point of view ; he had moments when he too could almost argue that honest virtue was not necessarily dull, that a sober, conventional, middle-class life pointed, perhaps, the surer way to happiness. But then Sugden could not be always with him, whereas the other was seldom far away. The poet's vacillating mind veered like a weathercock with each shifting breeze. At nights he was Henderson's man: whiskey flowed freely, and ah ! the brilliancy of those kaleidoscopic views of life seen under that glorious influence. He sat in Henderson's room, or Henderson in his, and listened to him expounding strange theories and telling stranger yarns of lands where laws were not, nor morality ; where traders lived in the South Seas ; where men gambled and fought and drank on the Pacific coast ; of strange things that he had seen and done prospecting for gold in Western Australia. What a blessing was strong drink ! It took him out of himself ; it stripped him of that husk of timidity that had always been his bane ; it made him for the time Henderson's equal—nay, his superior. How the thoughts came to him then, and words in which to clothe them—for a time ! And how tame and colour-

less by comparison were the drab lives of those others—men who had meekly submitted to the shackles, who wore them openly, and even took a sort of pride in displaying them—men like Sugden himself! He himself, for all his frail physique, was more of a man than Jack Sugden, when all was said.

This was how he felt in the evening. But the morning told a different story: in the morning he felt himself powerless, a weakling, and trembled at the thought of his high language of the night before. He would lie in bed, groaning in spirit, oppressed with an unutterable melancholy, rising perhaps at midday with the resolve to shut the door on the past and start a fresh life. Among March's notebooks—those manuscript volumes that received the first draft of his poems—might be found many of these schemes for reformation, set down in black and white, and attested by careful dates, as though the formality of the entry might render it more binding. For the drink-craving was growing upon him, he saw it gathering power week by week with a sort of dread that yet was not wholly fearful, but had mingled with it a spice of rebellious pride. He might not have much courage, but at least he had the courage to do as he chose. He was no longer—except in the mornings—one of those ascetics who chained up their passions, so to speak, for fear they might prove too strong for them. No! his should have a free rein: they were part of himself, part of the great complex human machine which it was his mission to study and expound. As Sargent was wont to say, “Why should we cultivate the intellect and starve the passions?”

His was a nature, too, that welcomed self-pity. He posed before himself, as he posed before his little coterie of brother-scribblers (whom he still continued to meet occasionally), as a creature of too fine a clay for this coarse world—a delicate vessel that could scarcely escape disaster—a predestined victim of a too highly strung organisation. It pleased him subtly to overhear any chance remark predicting an early grave, “There’s March, poor fellow, drinking himself to death,” or words to that effect. Standing aloof from himself he would examine his own personality and weep salt tears to think of so much promise riding recklessly to ruin. He had a marvellous sensibility. And in the meantime it is indubitable that the life he led stimulated his imagination. Out of the decay and rottenness of his life were extracted by a subtle alchemy some of the sweetest of his songs. Samson found honey in the carcase of his lion ; Theodore discovered his “Songs of an Outcast” in the dead body of his healthy self. Or perhaps in the dying body, for it was not yet past all hope of curing. If Jack Sugden set his mind to resuscitate it, there was still a chance.

If there was anybody in the world outside himself for whom March had any real affection, it was this kindly Philistine who had befriended him in his school-days, and was attempting now to save him from a worse enemy than any he had encountered in his innocent and unpopular youth. Sugden would look him up sometimes early in the afternoon, when he went out for lunch, and find the melancholy poet at breakfast, or just tentatively beginning the work of correcting proof-sheets, for the

“Songs of an Outcast” were now passing through the press. Jack was the only man to whom March would open the door on his mornings of depression and repentance, and he opened his heart to him as well. His was the kind of temperament that needed a father-confessor. I do not know that Jack relished the post thus allotted to him much, but his counsel was always unexceptionable in character, and he listened with exemplary gravity.

“What you want, my dear man,” he would say, “is fresh air and exercise, and a good lot of both. You sit at home all day and scarcely stir out to get your meals. That sort of thing makes you morbid and depressed—and no wonder. And then you get a sort of craving for excitement, naturally.”

“I can’t help it,” March would reply sadly. “I can’t take exercise, it bores me to death. That’s where it is with us: our work is our only recreation, and that’s why so many of us take to drugs or drinking. Whiskey is better than morphia, anyway.”

“You want another object in life besides poetry,” said Jack, coming up one day to meet with the customary demands upon his sympathy. “My theory is—always to have something in front of you, and plug along until you get it: then start another object and begin plugging again. That keeps you from thinking about yourself all the time, and gets you along at a better pace, too.”

“And isn’t that precisely what I do?” inquired the poet, querulously. “Only my work is of a sort in which we can never reach our ideals.”

“It seems to me that you want other objects as well. And, by the way, I wouldn’t see quite so much of

Sargent if I were you. He's a clever chap, and all that, and I admit he's interesting, but I don't think he's good company for you. He drinks all night—steadily—at least he does when I'm with him."

March lifted his hands with a pathetic gesture.

"My dear Sugden, if you only knew the ghastly dulness of this place in the evenings! Sargent's positively the only man here with any brains worth mentioning."

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Why not go out more?" he asked. "Lots of people would be glad to see you. Why not join a club?"

"I hate literary clubs. They're all full of people who want to advertise themselves and deprecate their neighbours."

"Some other club then. There's no reason why you should make it a literary concern."

"Any other club would bore me. Besides, I don't want to waste my time at clubs. I have my own work to do—and my own little circle of friends."

It was then that Jack recollected the proposed tea-party, and asked boldly if March was prepared to entertain two ladies to tea the next day.

"One of them is a great admirer of yours," he explained. "The other may be too, for all I know; but I don't fancy poetry's much in her line. You'll like Kitty, I think. She's the girl I'm engaged to, you know. She also bought 'Wind-flowers' when it came out, and knows it by heart, I believe."

March scented the coming incense, and would be only too pleased to give any friends of Sugden such humble

entertainment as his rooms could afford. To do him justice, he managed the little entertainment very creditably indeed, even to the extent of buying some spring flowers with which to decorate his room. And when the ladies arrived, and Sugden with them, his pose of the literary celebrity receiving homage was only slightly in evidence. He laid himself out to be witty, and playfully cynical, and he could talk well when he chose to exert himself. Mrs. Fleming was quite charmed with him.

“I had no idea poets were half so interesting,” she confessed as Jack was escorting his party homewards again.

“Poor little man,” said Kitty. “You can see he’s awfully clever, but how ill he looks! And how small and weak! Did you notice how his tea-cup shook in his hand?”

“I noticed he paid you a great many compliments,” said the matron, smiling.

But Kitty did not laugh: she was reflecting on the past.

“And I used to think that intellect was everything in a man,” she continued pensively. “I remember reading his poems and crying over them. I gave them to you, Jack, do you remember?” She shivered suddenly. “I don’t somehow quite like him as much as I thought I should. I think strength is more important than cleverness after all.”

“Isn’t that a little personal?” asked Mrs. Fleming with a touch of slyness. But the question fell unheeded, for Jack was signalling a hansom. He helped them in and said goodbye.

“I’ll see you off to-morrow, then—Liverpool Street at three o’clock,” he said. For Kitty was going home next day. He raised his hat as they drove off, and replaced it with a distinct sense of melancholy. It had been a pleasant fortnight, and here was the end. And when was he going to get enough money to marry on? But the momentary gloom faded in an instant from his face, and he smiled.

“I don’t fancy I’ve much to complain about,” was his reflection as he turned towards the Temple.

And in the cab rolling swiftly westward Kitty was saying to her companion how glad she was that Jack was not like that little poet. Mrs. Fleming laughed.

“You don’t seem to have been much impressed with Mr. March,” she said. “I thought him quite presentable, and rather pleasant.”

“Poor little thing!” said Kitty. “He’s not a man at all.” After which definite pronouncement she refused to discuss the poet any further.

CHAPTER XXI

AT Stourton Rectory, encircled by the ceaseless wreaths of black smoke rising from the quarry chimneys, and harassed daily by the continual clash and clatter of the stone-breaking machine a few hundred yards beyond the garden-wall, things proceeded very much as they had done before the startling defection of Mr. Hirst, now working out another farm in a neighbouring county on the same simple principle he had employed with the Stourton glebe. The casual visitor would not have noticed any great difference in the conduct of the household, sadly shrunk as it was in comparison with its former state. The garden perhaps was hardly so trim and well kept as of old, except towards the end of the week, when a man came in from the village to mow the lawn and weed the paths, and do what he could with the flower-beds. A small boy, hired at a shilling a week, arrived every morning to clean the boots and knives, and chop wood; the stable was empty, the carriage and dog-cart had vanished from the coach house. A single stout but willing maid servant, with Mrs. Sugden's assistance, cooked the meals and scrubbed the floors. Evelyn did her share of the daily work, making the beds and dusting

the three rooms on the ground flour. Yet visitors came and went, were fed and hospitably entertained, were even put up for a night or two without a sign of that fuss and anxiety so common in the houses of wealthier folk. So much can adroit management effect, conjoined with sound sense. The Sugdens were not concerned to "keep up appearances," as the phrase runs: they did not sit solemnly round the dinner table and expect the hard-worked cook to bring in the food and plates and hand round vegetables. Evelyn was the housemaid of the family—and a very pretty housemaid too.

"It's my belief you were never so happy before in your life," said her father, who would playfully pass his arm round her waist every time she brought him the potatoes. "Mother—she looks healthier than ever. Did you ever see such a colour? Nothing like hard work for happiness, is there?"

And Evelyn would laugh gaily and say he was perfectly right—as indeed he was. For the girl had wanted something to do: she had hoped for years to be of some real use in the world, to be indispensable. Once—it seemed ages ago now—she had dreamed of missionary work, of nursing in a hospital. But that was before the wound had healed. It was better, infinitely better, to find work at home, among those whom she loved. Hers was not the nature to go out alone into the world. Those old dreams were of the past—of the days when she had wished for a martyr's crown, and had thought to stifle one pain by embracing others. Yes! it was true, she was healthier now: the wound was healed, the scar almost invisible. Sometimes she could think of it with

a smile, in which there lingered scarcely a trace of melancholy.

The episode was past, but it had gone to the making of the girl's character. So, too, had the sudden change in their fortunes. She had learned to take her stand upon the realities, to perceive the unimportance of conventional trivialities, and consequently she had lost a good deal of that shyness in conversation that had marked her three or four years ago. She could talk to comparative strangers now without blushing. Poverty, open and undisguised, carries sometimes this advantage, that it renders us less self-conscious, less careful of conciliating the opinions of the outside world. For to be obviously poor is in a sense to be without the pale of convention—which saves in the end a lot of trouble.

Evelyn was becoming more companionable. Since the Henderson affair she had always, until recently, held herself aloof from men. In the neighbourhood there were several who were well disposed to admire this quiet, pretty girl, who seemed to have no intimates among the other young ladies of the district. But they found it singularly difficult to advance—beyond a certain point. She was pleasant enough, but she obstinately refused to expand, to be drawn into those little confidences that so often pave an easy path towards love-making. It was decided that she was cold, or proud, or both.

“Mark my words,” said Miss Fanny Weston, who was always very positive in her judgments. “That Sugden girl will die an old maid. She turns up her nose at every man in the county. I suppose we're not good enough for her down here; she's waiting for one of her

brother's friends from town. And she's not likely to catch any of them."

For there was no "style" about Evelyn Sugden, in the opinion of that vivacious critic, and to her eyes that indefinable quality was absolutely essential to the successful trapping of the Londoner, accustomed his life through to pretty toilets and smart conversation.

But the young men of the Stourton neighbourhood did not, perhaps, understand how to win the regard of Miss Sugden. She was really neither proud nor cold—is it necessary to say so now?—but she had always an instinctive dislike of mere idle chatter. She was inclined to the serious, it is true, and she had her own ideas of what a man should be like. She looked for strength of character ; she was ready enough to talk if she were approached intelligently ; but she shrank naturally from the customary phrases of compliment that some men deal out to pretty girls as though they were mere children, to be flattered with tinsel ornament. For she had known a man, and, for a time at least, idealised him ; in comparison with that half-forgotten memory, what were these pale curates and callow undergraduates who came up at garden parties, hazarding daring remarks about the weather? It must be confessed that they bored her. And then, when the crash came, and she began to forget the past, she ceased also to attend these functions. Henceforth, the only men who had a chance of seeing her were those few who came to Stourton—chiefly the surrounding clergymen who attended rural-decanal meetings—or the very few whom Jack brought down with him on his occasional visits.

These, indeed, saw her at her best. Evelyn was one of those girls whom it is possible to know intimately at home, and nowhere else. She was domestic by nature ; her family was everything to her ; their presence gave an added sense of security, and made it so much easier to talk. There was something very charming, too, in meeting her away from all the formal restraints of society. Intimacy obviously began the sooner, when there were no troublesome conventionalities to be overcome at the outset. A girl at a garden party, in a new hat and a muslin dress, is in a sense armoured against attack. Her defences attract the eye, but repel an intimate acquaintance. The same girl at home, in a plain blouse and skirt, attired for work rather than show, is a step nearer nature, nearer the true woman.

Durrant, on his first visit to Stourton Rectory, came to something of the same conclusion. About thirty-six years of age, alert, clean-shaven, rather given to view life as though it were a puppet-show played for his amusement, the actors in which were liable to be called up before him for cross-examination at any moment, he was very far from being an impressionable, a susceptible man. There was a vein of irony in Durrant. Yet he was capable of strong affections. He had grown to like Jack Sugden with startling rapidity, and he found himself already, even on his first visit to Stourton, taking so strong an interest in that young man's future career that a bond of sympathy was at once established between him and the family. It was difficult for any one, favourably predisposed or not, to stay a night or two at the Rectory without conceiving a sort of liking for its cheerful

inhabitants. On that first visit he had been but little in the house ; business called him to catch a train immediately after an early breakfast, and forbade him to return till close upon dinner-time or even later. But for all that, he felt, on going away, that he was leaving old friends. The Sugdens had the art of inspiring this pleasing regretfulness in the departing guest.

More than that, he found himself, returning to London, vaguely disturbed and restless in his mind—in that curious condition when the sufferer is conscious of having lost something, but unable at first to figure to himself the object of which he has been deprived. He was aware of a vacancy, of something lacking ; as he sat in his rooms at night, reflecting on the business of the day, other subjects would keep intruding upon his thoughts. It was a comfortable flat, and Jack Sugden made a pleasant companion. But in a year or so—five years or so—what would be his position ? He saw himself desolate, a successful barrister accumulating money, but living in the same old way, with none but himself on whom to spend it. Jack was going to marry : he was going to be a lonely bachelor.

His roving mind pictured again the domestic scenes he had witnessed at Stourton, and almost instinctively he realised in a flash where lay the hidden mischief. He saw the family at dinner, and Evelyn sitting opposite to him, and the smile that seemed to light up her face when he happened to say something to her about Jack and his prospects. He remembered seeing her clear away the things after breakfast, quietly and unobtrusively, without any fuss or affectation, and how she had allowed him to

help, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for guests to carry laden trays into the kitchen. It was then he had first noticed what a remarkably pretty girl she was. Somehow hers was not the style that strikes the observer immediately : it rather grew upon him by slow degrees ; there was the domestic touch in it. Not during all his visit had he ever formulated the opinion definitely ; it was only on reflection afterwards that he began to marvel at his own want of perception, and to feel a curious anxiety to see her again.

“Remember, now,” Sugden had said on parting, “you’re to look in whenever you’re down our way. Evy there keeps poultry in the back garden ; she feeds us all capitally. Eggs and devilled drumsticks for breakfast, cold chicken for lunch, omelette and fricassee for dinner.” He rolled out his rich bass laugh, quite in the old style, making a jest of poverty.

And when Durrant had gone, the cheerful man expatiated at large upon his virtues to the assembled family.

“I’d have that young man in,” he said, “if we had to kill the old cow in the front field for him, and go without milk the rest of our days. See what he’s done for Jack, now. That’s what I call a friend, eh ? Evy, you and your mother fed him nobly. Where will it all have come from, I’m thinking ? Will there be any chickens left at all, at all ? ”

“Father, dear, you’re too bad for anything,” Evelyn expostulated. “Fancy telling him about my poultry yard ! He’ll be afraid to eat anything next time he comes.”

She was disposed to like Mr. Durrant, and not only because he had been kind to Jack. He had a pleasant face, and there was cleverness enough in it as well. And he talked to her as if she understood things—a compliment too rarely paid to pretty girls.

“He’s the cleverest fellow on the circuit,” said her father, as though unconsciously reading her thoughts. “And he believes in Jack thoroughly—says he’s certain to do well in time. So he will—eh? Mother, the boy’s got good stuff in him.”

Mrs. Sugden, industriously mending a shirt, assented with her usual placidity. “Things generally come out right in the end,” was her contribution to the common store of optimism. Her husband rubbed his hands in evident enjoyment.

“Bravo! Them’s my sentiments, every time. Evy, when you marry, remember that the true road to happiness lies in reflecting your husband’s temperament. And that’s a good phrase—I’ll catch it for my next sermon.” He retired chuckling to the study.

Durrant looked in again, three months afterwards, with Jack, but was too busy to stay. And since that time he had made a point of seeing the Sugdens somehow, every time he came down, if it was any way possible. This Easter the two stayed there together over Sunday, some three days in all, and Durrant had time to learn the nature of his disease. When he got home again to London he was afflicted with a curious mingling of exaltation and melancholy. Yes! he had found himself out at last: he was in love. That was the cause at once of the two emotions. He loved her,

and she had sometimes smiled upon him. Hence the exaltation. The melancholy came when he reflected that he had found no opportunity to say anything definite. Who knew what might happen before he got another chance?

"It might have been too early, all the same," he reflected, time after time. "But then, on the other hand, it may be too late when I go down again." The problem is one that lovers may consider with corrugated brows for any length of time without approaching an adequate solution. With a sort of half-amused irritation this apostle of common sense, this calm critic of his fellows, beheld himself passing through precisely the same phases of exultant hope and extravagant despair as have afflicted the race of lovers for untold centuries. It was not much relief to stand aloof and look down upon himself rowing painfully in this galley, but it was something. At times, like the rest, he would have his intervals of comparative sanity, moments of tolerable calm in which he soothed himself with the customary maxims of philosophy. After all, the girl was still young; she lived secluded from the world in an unvisited and obscure village; it was not as though she were surrounded by a throng of clamouring suitors. She was his discovery—in a sense—so far as he knew.

Durrant was a self-contained person, as beffited a member of his profession. He had a rooted objection to betraying his emotions in any way, and he did not betray them now. He was a shade less talkative than usual, and perhaps a trifle more inclined to solitude. He found

that he could sit alone in his rooms for hours at a time without the least desire for conversation, or companionship, or reading. There was so much to think about in this novel and unexpected upheaval of himself. He said nothing to Jack on the subject, and his comrade was too much engrossed in his own affairs to harbour any suspicion of the truth. But sometimes he debated seriously whether he should tell him or not. It is difficult for any man, conscious of this strange fire burning within him, to keep his new possession entirely to himself. He is in the position of an enthusiastic collector, with some priceless specimen locked in a secret cupboard : he cannot enjoy his treasure to the full without submitting it to a brother expert. And Jack was in love too : he would understand. Now and again Durrant wavered, but he had a gift of natural reticence. He preferred to close his lips with a smile at his own weakness.

He reflected that, on the whole, he was a man, and prepared to stand or fall on his own merits. To tell her brother would be to enlist an advocate, and to suppose that this eminent barrister could not plead his own case was obviously absurd. There was time enough, he assured himself ; there was no particular cause for anxiety. Only—he wished he had some notion of what the girl thought. And then, of course, he would set to and recall all the sentences she had ever addressed to him, all the occasions on which she had looked up with a smile, that afternoon when he had brought out the mowing-machine and mown the garden because she had said something laughingly about his capacity for hard work. It was the action of a boy—but then love has a

way of making men surprisingly young. But did she really care for him at all?

“How on earth can any one know?” he would ask himself in a fit of irritation, rising hastily and pacing up and down the room. Then he would give a short laugh, and settle down again in his chair with a frown. It was too ridiculous, wasting all this time over an insoluble problem.

“There are no facts to go upon,” he decided. “Except—possibly—” His mind would begin again on the old circle of reminiscence.

“I wonder if she knows?” he would ask himself again. Had she the faintest suspicion that he was thinking of her all this time? Girls were supposed to have good eyes in this matter. Finding himself once more on the well-trodden track Durrant would frown horribly. It vexed his logical soul to go on thinking in this aimless fashion, and yet it was so entrancing a pursuit that he could hardly tear himself away from it. The worst was, that this recreation fed his disease alarmingly; it gave symptoms of growing beyond all control. There was a framed photograph of her in Jack’s room, which he would go and gaze at sometimes when the owner was away.

“Next time,” he repeated invariably on these occasions, “I shall certainly make an end of this one way or the other.” But he wished he could formulate some sort of an opinion as to which way it would turn out, when the crisis came.

CHAPTER XXII

If Theodore March was qualifying himself, under Sargent's kindly guidance, for a madhouse or an early grave, I do not know that his amiable Mentor himself was particularly well pleased with the new life that he had chosen to enter. He had been a wanderer from his youth up, a free lance, doing precisely what he chose and subject to no outside dictation, fearing neither God nor man ; now he felt himself harnessed, as it were, an untamed colt turned into a publisher's hack, writing books for money, and the straps galled him sadly. And yet money was useful : he had known what it meant to be without money and without food, and a certain competence was better than hunger, even though it was gained by scribbling serial stories of adventure in an attic. But he had no sort of enthusiasm for his trade. It was not the part of a man, as he was wont to declare, to sit indoors with a pen and cover reams of foolscap with plausible yarns for the amusement of the half-educated, when he might be out in the open air, cow-punching on a Texas ranche or stock-riding in the Australian back-blocks. Literature had no glories for him ; he professed a sublime indifference as to his reputation as a writer.

Yet his books had brought him some fame and a reasonable income. He spent the money—how it all went would be difficult to say—and cursed the means by which it was obtained. He grew more cynical every time Sugden saw him, on the subject of his profession and of those who pursued it. Yet he hungered for his society—he said as much every time Jack ascended the narrow stairs to knock at the poet's door. The sound of his footsteps always drew Sargent Henderson from his lair : he would come out and try and ensnare the visitor for himself.

“No good, my dear fellow,” he would say. “March is out on the loose. Come in and see me instead. I’ve not talked with a reasonable being since you were here last. It’s a mere act of charity.”

And Jack would go in, after satisfying himself that March was not inside, and smoke awhile with the forlorn hermit, partly because of the good nature that seldom allowed him to say no to any appeal, and partly because he could not help being attracted by Sargent, who had a fine flow of words and, what was more important, some original ideas underlying them. For even when in the worst possible of moods—and his temper was not so equable as it had been—the man was always interesting. It was never a difficult matter to set him talking. The first remark set loose a cataract, an overwhelming torrent—when the companion was congenial.

On one occasion Jack incautiously asked how the new book was getting on, and drew down upon himself a diatribe of the most violent description on literature in general, and literary practitioners in particular.

"The more I see of them," said Sargent, filling up his glass with a liberal supply of whiskey, "the more I loathe them. Literature ! I hate the word ; it stinks in my nostrils ; it signifies to me nothing but insincerity and pretence and make-believe. Now, you are a man of sense, Sugden, more or less, and yet you too are infected with the prevalent belief that the writing of books is a noble profession. They have deceived you—roped you in along with the rest. Man ! I tell you it is a despicable profession, and its followers are a set of despicable whining hounds. When they succeed, as they call it, they snarl at any one who comes near them ; when they fail, they cry out that they are ill-used, misunderstood, and all the rest of it. But the world is persuaded that they are noble fellows. The literary gang take good care of that. They have been preaching the doctrine in books and in the public press for centuries. They have done nothing but crack up themselves and their craft since the days of Homer."

The spectacle of a man thus forcibly inveighing against his own profession had its comical side. Jack laughed.

"Oh, come," he remonstrated, "it's not as bad as all that. Some of them have been pretty useful. Look at the scientists."

Sargent checked him with a minatory fore-finger, a way he had in argument.

"I'm not talking of them," he said. "That's a different matter. I give you in the philosophers, the scientists, the writers of history if you like. They have their use ; I pass them, they can go on writing if they like. But that is not literature pure and simple, that is

literature *plus* something else that redeems it from being pure drivel. I'll go further, if you like : I'll even give you half a dozen poets or so, if you must have poetry, and half a dozen of the best novelists, if you must have fiction. Though mind you, I think nothing much of them. For all their chatter the world would have got on just as well if Tennyson had never lived, or Browning either."

"I take it they helped things along a bit. It's the business of the poets to popularise new truths."

"Is it ? They set commonplaces to music. They cover up the obvious with sugar. If you want to learn, go to a Darwin, a Huxley, a Herbert Spencer, and you'll get it, plain and solid. What do you want with truth dressed up to look pretty ?" Sargent growled and grumbled as he rose to get a light for his pipe. "No ! I'm sick of all the incense these poets and novelists get. One practical man, one man who works with his hands for the good of the world is worth a dozen of them, a dozen of the best. And when you come down to the small fry—the whimpering crowd that write the novels and verses of to-day—I tell you they make me sick."

"I suppose they have their use. A good novel is an educational factor—it teaches us how to live."

Sargent smiled contempt. He leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs in front of him. The drinking of whiskey had always the effect of making him talk more slowly (up to a certain point) while it strengthened the venom of his comments. It was with something of a drawl that he continued.

"What you call a good novel is probably the worst

guide to life a man could find. It preaches lies ; it occupies itself with bolstering up the conventions. It's about as good a guide as a melodrama on the stage : it punishes vice and rewards virtue — what the author chooses to consider vice and virtue. What does he know about either, except from hearsay ? I feel inclined, on reading a book of that sort, to say, like the gentleman who argued for three hours with the Calvinistic minister, 'I see what it is, my dear sir, your God is my devil.'

"I'm inclined to think that your god is my devil," said Sugden gravely.

"Good !" Sargent laughed softly. "We all make them for ourselves, if we make them at all, and if we don't accept them from tradition. Man commonly makes a god in his own image, though the Scriptures say the contrary."

The talk drifted into the fruitful subject of anthropomorphism, and eddied for a while among the rocks and shoals of comparative religion, not particularly to Sugden's edification. For he was a Christian by birth and training, the son of Christian parents, and what they held truth was good enough for him. He formulated his simple creed as a sort of protest.

"I don't bother about all these things," he said at last. "My belief is that if we do the best we can according to our lights, and keep on plugging, we shall get there in time."

His companion regarded him quizzically for a few moments, but forbore to pursue the topic.

"Well, you're a good sort," he said at last, with half a sigh, "and I'm not going to worry you."

The subject was not resumed again between these two. The evils of the literary life, however, cropped up with persistent regularity every time they met. Generally some reference to March served to introduce this unfailing grievance. It was noticeable that Sargent spoke of the poet with increasing contempt and with a sort of exasperation.

"Why you should fuss about the little fool I can't imagine," he would say. "He is the merest worm—a lying little sweep. He makes me tired. Why! the fellow hasn't pluck enough to sin. He invents all his trumpery affairs, and then comes to me and confesses. I get sick of the sight of him. But that's where it is—I've no one else to talk to in this confounded hole."

Jack told him straightforwardly what he thought one night.

"The fact is," he said, "you are ruining the poor little beggar. There's good in him somewhere—I believe there's some good in everybody if you look for it. Give him a chance. Don't you see he's drinking himself to death?"

"A good job too," said Sargent with bitter cynicism. "He isn't fit to live, and that's a solid fact. What's the good of him, any way? Now, look here, Sugden! here's a case in point of a poet who's absolutely useless to the community. Can you pretend that any one was ever the better for reading March's verse?" Jack smiled, for he remembered how a certain volume had come into his possession. "He writes about passion, and fire, and desire, and all the rest of it. What does he know about

it? Do you think there's any fire and passion in that poor little decrepit fool?"

Jack smiled at his vehemence. "If not, he's all the better without it, I expect," was all he said.

"Then why the devil does he pretend there is?" Sargent spoke with extraordinary rancour. "Why does he come up here hinting at all sorts of vice, when he's never done anything worth mentioning?" He broke off with a short, angry laugh. "You'll never make a man of him, Sugden, if you try till you're blue in the face. I thought I'd try myself—once. But he hasn't the pluck to cut himself loose and preach the gospel of liberty. He plays with it, and thinks all the time that he's no end of a firebrand. If he could have gone thoroughly to the bad—chucked propriety over altogether—he might have done something. Whereas—he gets drunk every other day, and that's all."

Jack knocked the ashes out of his pipe reflectively.

"You've had your try," he said at last, "and it's pretty clear you've done the poor beggar more harm than good. I don't deny he's going to the dogs, but I mean to stop him if I can. After all, I've known him ever since I was a kid, and I can't stand by and see him go to the devil without making an effort."

Sargent watched him through half-closed eyelids. "What's your recipe, anyway?" he asked.

"Take him away for a bit," said Jack simply. "It seems to me you'll both be the better away from each other."

His opponent smoked for a while in silence, gazing listlessly at the ceiling.

"Well, try it, if you like," he resumed after a pause. "I can't say I shall be sorry altogether. He's got on my nerves—that little poet of yours." He mused. "A year ago I hadn't got any nerves—didn't know what they were. If a man bothered me, I let him know it—or left him. There was some room in the world then. Now we're shut up here together and can't get away, and sometimes, I give you my word, when that little fool comes in and talks to me I could take him by the throat and squeeze the life out of him." He emphasised the words with an expressive gesture. "Mind you, I don't really object to the little beggar, either. When I've been alone here some time I'm positively glad to hear him coming upstairs. It's merely that now and then he does get on my nerves, as I say. That's what comes of taking to writing. All art is a form of disease ; you cannot touch it and keep healthy."

"Why not chuck it and go out again ?" Jack asked, naturally enough.

Sargent smiled grimly. "Ah ! why not ?" he said. "Well, because I'm a fool, I suppose—because I have been a fool and always will be one. So I sit here and write books and make money enough to live on, and I daresay there are other fools who envy me because I can serialise my stuff and get something down on account of royalties. Oh, yes ! I'm what they call a success in the literary world. Well ! I eat and drink, and to-morrow I die, and leave a name that lasts perhaps for six months if I'm lucky. Have a whiskey ? "

"No more, thanks. But, hang it, man, it's something to have made a name like yours."

“Yes, it’s a good one, isn’t it?” Sargent sneered. “Looks well on the back of a book, I admit. But the name isn’t the man. Nobody knows the man behind it all—not even my publishers. They get it through an agent. What’s it matter anyway? Here’s your firebrand coming home—drunk, I should judge, by the sound of him.”

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was never a very difficult matter to persuade March, if he was handled at the proper time, and Jack Sugden had sufficient penetration and, let us add, sufficient experience to enable him to approach the poet at a suitable moment. The next morning, he was well aware, would find March broken and abject, mere clay in the hand of the potter, ready to agree to any scheme for his own reformation. He went accordingly, after getting through his morning's work, to discover his melancholy friend sitting in a dressing-gown before his table, inscribing reflections in his notebook.

“Life is a disease, of which sleep is a palliative, and death the only cure,” he was writing in his curiously angular hand.

The thoughts were not invariably original, but they served. In that particular apophthegm lay the seed of a poem in six stanzas, which the curious may find in “*Twilight, and other Poems.*”

He raised heavy eyes as Sugden entered the room. The outer door was open. A faint smile crept over March's face as he recognised his visitor—a gleam of sunshine breaking through heavy clouds. He laid down

his pen with a sigh of relief and leaned back in his chair.

“Ah, it’s you !” He stretched out a shaking hand, and his eyelids twitched painfully. “I hoped you might look in. I’m all to pieces to-day.”

Sugden eyed him with a sort of kindly contempt, as a mastiff might look at a sickly, under-sized mongrel. “I gathered you might be,” he said rather drily.

The poet passed a hand wearily across his brow, from which a wave of lank hair was apt to fall over his eyes. He smiled again, faintly as before.

“It’s good of you to come, Sugden. I want cheering up—some one to help me out of the slough. I fell again last night—deep into the pit.” March had the merit of candour in self-condemnation when he was in the mood for confession.

“Well, I’m here to help you out of it,” said his cheerful visitor. “Look here, now, March, this sort of thing must stop. It won’t do. You’re killing yourself just as fast as you can. And what for? What’s the pleasure you get out of it? Here you are, with plenty of money and getting on first-class at everything you take up, and yet you must needs go and chuck it all away—for nothing. I’ve told you so before, a dozen times if I’ve told you once, and you haven’t got the pluck to pull up.”

March gazed gloomily at his ink-pot. “I know,” he assented mournfully, “I know. It’s all true enough. I haven’t got the strength to break it off.” Suddenly a light came into his eyes, and the poet began to moralise upon himself. “And is that not where we all fail?”

he proceeded in the sort of dreamy monotone that he affected on these occasions. "We complain that we have not strength to escape from evil, but the feeblest of us has strength enough to avoid encountering it. We yield to temptation deliberately ; we elect to experiment upon our fortitude with new vices, thinking we can shake them off when we choose to exert ourselves. And then we find, too late, that we have made a fatal miscalculation, and we abuse our own weakness. Yet it is not our weakness that has ruined us ; it is the fact that we did not apply our strength at the right moment."

His hand closed mechanically round his pen, and he scratched cabalistic signs in his notebook. "God has his answer," he wrote, "*Revocare gradum—hic labor.* The weakest of us is strong enough to avoid the abyss, the strongest too weak to clamber out." He lay back in his chair with a sigh, as though at something safely accomplished, an errant thought secured for future polishing.

"Curious chap you are !" said Sugden, not without a touch of admiration for the industrious diver seeking for pearls in a muddy duck-pond, and occasionally fishing up quite plausible imitations.

March smiled with a pleased sense of superiority. Of course he was curious ; he was a creature of finer clay than the ordinary, his emotions keener, his sensibility more acute. For a moment he felt old—very old and wise, full of dark experience—beside the innocent apostle of health. He had sounded life ; he had eaten fruit plucked from the tree of knowledge. Was it not worth a few scratches and bruises ? Yet he spoke still

with a chastened melancholy, for his head throbbed and his eyes were heavy.

“I doubt sometimes,” he went on, “whether I have any longer the wish to escape. There are subtle pleasures in what the world calls a life of vice. Not at the time. I can say honestly that the gross and sensual pleasures scarcely affect me ; I tasted them from curiosity ; I go on tasting them to reap the harvest of grave, sad, inexpressibly mournful thoughts that flow in upon me afterwards. Is it not almost a necessity that the poet should range through the whole gamut of human emotion ? He must know passion and satiety, he must hate and fear and love, he must feel the horror and loathing of being sucked down quick into the pit.”

Jack arose with a sudden energy and a quick movement of the head that made him resemble a big Newfoundland dog shaking itself free of contaminating moisture.

“Skittles !” said the practical man briskly. “That all sounds very fine, March, but it won’t wash. It’s drivel—and, besides, you got it from Sargent. Now look here ! I’m taking a hand in this show. I’m going to take you out of this—by main force, if necessary. You come down to the country with me to-morrow, and leave all this behind you. Or do you want to die, and go to the devil ?”

March waved his hand wearily. “I don’t know that I care very much,” he said. “As to the devil—*il n’existe plus*—in that form. I am my own God and my own devil. As to death, it must come. *Non omnis moriar.*

I leave a monument behind me—perhaps more enduring than London bronze."

"That's as it may be," said the man of action. "I'm coming for you at midday to-morrow. Will you be ready?"

"Ready?" The poet echoed the word pettishly. "How can I be ready? I'm not fit to think of packing up. I'm all to pieces. My head's singing like a kettle. My dear Sugden, it's good of you to suggest it, but I can't go like this. Besides, I want to work."

Jack looked at his watch and closed it with a decisive snap. "Oh, you kick, do you?" he inquired pleasantly. "My young friend, you ought to know me by this time. We'll start now! I give you half an hour to pack, and we go down from St. Pancras by the two train, in time for tea. Work? Where can a poet work better than in the country, in summer? They're hay-making there now. If you don't get out of your pit at Stourton I'm a Dutchman. There's no drink in the house, and no Sargent either. Come along now, bustle a bit. Where's your Gladstone bag? We don't dress down there." He marched into the bedroom and dragged out a small portmanteau and placed it open on the table. "Shove 'em in," he commanded. "Put in any books you want."

March vacillated, a feather caught in a whirlwind. "My dear fellow," he protested weakly, "do be reasonable. My nerves are all shattered." He almost whimpered. "I can't do it." He spread impotent hands. "What can I take?"

But the practical Sugden was already filling his portmanteau with the skill of an experienced valet.

“Haven’t you any flannels?” he asked. “Well, these will have to do. Shirts, collars, boots, brushes. Go and stick on a coat. Be sharp! We must be off in ten minutes.”

And the poet, surrendering himself, with a last vain protest, moved slowly to his bedroom.

“I’m chucking a day’s work for you,” Jack called after him. “It’s all for your good. And I’m coming down with you to introduce you. There’ll be no bother. You ought to thank me instead of growling like that. You will, when you’ve been down there a fortnight, and begin to feel fit.”

“But how are you going to manage yourself?” asked the other, between inarticulate groans. “Where are your things?”

But Jack had a duplicate set at Stourton. “Not being an absolute fool,” he said gaily, “I provide for emergencies—like the present.” He caught up the portmanteau as though it were a feather-weight, and marched off. Incoherent, but subdued, March followed him. His captor hailed a cab at the gate, and in less than half a minute they were trotting merrily up the Gray’s Inn Road. In twenty minutes they were seated in a railway carriage, and Jack had despatched to his father a laconic telegram announcing the arrival of an unexpected guest. The poet sat silent in his corner, and made no sign. It was not until they were approaching Bedford that Jack discovered he was quietly weeping.

“Great heavens! What’s wrong now?” he asked, half disgusted, half touched at the unmanly exhibition. But March was in no condition for a lucid explanation.

He had been wounded on the feminine side of his sensitive nature ; his vanity was hurt ; the unceremonious nature of his abduction suddenly had come home to him. He wept from a sense of his own weakness, mingled with keen resentment at the lack of consideration paid to so eminent a personage. And he was miserable—he felt acutely that he was ill and broken down and wretched—unfit to consort with strangers. He was stirred with a sudden passion.

“Why did you bring me away like this ?” he said, in a quick flash of anger. “You carry me off as if I was nothing. Damn you !” His voice rose to a shriek.

Jack stared at him in astonishment. “Easy all, old chap !” he expostulated. “Take a pull at yourself. You’re hysterical.”

But March’s fury expired as quickly as it had arisen, and he lapsed into lamentation and apology.

“I’m sorry,” he moaned. “I didn’t mean it. My nerves are all wrong.”

“You’ll be all right in a day or two,” his companion encouraged him.

But March was overcome with melancholy. “I shall never be any use again,” he lamented. “I’m all broken up. I can’t even write. I’m not fit for anything. I wish I was dead.” His words came in a succession of short, broken sentences. “Why do you take all this trouble about me ? I know you mean well, but what’s the good ? I’m done for.” He gazed mournfully out of the window at the fields and hedges racing by. “What’s the use of it all ?” he reiterated.

“You wait and see,” said cheery Jack. By degrees

he coaxed him into a better mood, as he might have coaxed a refractory child, marvelling greatly to himself at the strange nature of poets. Were they all like this? he wondered. If so, they must be a pretty poor crowd, as he phrased it in his own mind. But there it was: one had to pay for possessing acute sensibility. "Thank Heaven, I am not a poet!" reflected the honest fellow. Indeed, he had not much of the artistic temperament in his nature, which was no doubt as well for his personal happiness. He resolved, when he got home, to give his people a hint to treat their new visitor tenderly.

"The old man might get on his nerves if he laughed too loud," Jack decided, and smiled at the humour of the reflection.

To March he said, as they walked up to the Rectory from the station, "You must just make yourself at home here; they'll treat you as if you were one of the family. And in a fortnight, you'll see, you'll find yourself a different man. I'll tell them you've been overworking."

And so March made his fateful appearance at Stourton Rectory in the character of an interesting invalid, a pose that suited him well enough at any time, and superlatively well just now. To excite an admiring compassion was his ideal of human happiness. After all, to play the lion in a country village was no unpleasant change for a while. He sat in his chair and drank his tea—a pale, fragile, interesting figure—smiling faintly when addressed. Afterwards, when he had gone upstairs to unpack his things, Jack explained.

"He's a poet, and his nerves are all wrong," he

said, with admirable directness. "He wants bracing up."

"A poet!" echoed mother and daughter simultaneously. "I thought he looked like a poet," added Evelyn. Mrs. Sugden was of opinion that he looked terribly ill.

"I couldn't think of anything else for him," Jack went on. "He's in a bad way. If any one could pull him round I thought you could."

"And who's to pull us round?" asked his father, with a laugh. "Jack, my boy, we positively haven't a fatted calf left on the premises. Durrant had the last, three months ago." The most undignified of clerics winked at his daughter. "Evy's keeping her last fowl for the next time he comes," he declared. "Will the poet be a hungry man now? If so, we're done."

Jack laughed. "Father, you must go easy with him," he said. "He's a tender plant. I don't fancy he's quite got the humorous standpoint. He takes things seriously."

The Rector composed his features into an expression of the intensest solemnity, and relaxed them as suddenly. "Well, so be it," he said, "if he's built that way. It's a poor heart that never rejoices. Come into the study, my son, and smoke a pipe along with me. How goes the great world? Can you stay a night or two?"

Jack shook his head. "I must be off to-morrow. I've a case coming on—a real live case." He smiled. "I got it by sheer luck. The man's a friend of yours?"

"What is it? Murder, or forgery? Not a dear friend, I trust."

“It’s a libel action,” explained Jack, with a touch of pride. “I’m in it as junior. Got the papers on Monday, and am drawing up the defence. It’s a man I met at young Templar’s one day. Dunkley his name is. Said he knew you well.”

“He does,” groaned the clergyman comically. “I lent him money once. What’s he doing?”

“Editing a society rag. His own property, I fancy. Gets an action for libel brought against him about once a month, I should say. He was good enough to say he’d give me the next when he heard who I was. Of course I never thought he meant a word of it. I nearly fell off my chair when the clerk brought me the papers.”

“Well, it’s one way of paying off a debt, any way. It may give you a useful start, I suppose.”

“Durrant thinks so,” said Jack simply. “If by any chance my leader’s a busy man, and gives me an opening, he says I may make myself over this case. There’s a good defence—at law ; rather a nice point.”

Sugden meditated in silence as he lit his pipe.

“Well, it’s a small world,” he said, as he settled down in his accustomed chair, “and things do happen occasionally. But this beats everything. Old Dunkley cropping up again ! Aye, mon, its curious, vara curious ! An’ so you canna stay wi’ us. It’s no to be expectit, ahm thinking. But you leave Mr. What’s-his-name behind, eh ?”

“Theodore March. Yes, he’ll stop a bit if you can do with him.”

“Sure, an’ we’ll do the best we can for him,” said the philosophical clergyman.

CHAPTER XXIV

JACK, the energetic, left early in the morning to pursue his researches into the law of libel on behalf of the harassed Dunkley. March was entrusted to the care of the family, with a few parting injunctions.

“Mind he doesn’t run away,” said the abductor of poets. “He’ll feel bored to death, as likely as not. Evy, you must draw him out a bit. Talk to him about Tennyson, and all that kind of stuff, you know. Mother, you must see he gets up early and goes to bed in good time. You needn’t be afraid of the poor little beggar. He won’t bite.”

The ladies laughed in unison at the idea of their being afraid of so fragile an individual.

“I quite like him already,” Evelyn declared boldly. “It’s most interesting having a real poet in the house. Do you think he’s brought any of his books with him?”

“Not much. I saw to that.” Jack spoke with a touch of sardonic humour.

“Perhaps he’ll write some more down here,” said Mrs. Sugden placidly, as though books of poetry could

be turned out by the gross in a fortnight's summer holiday.

"Evy shall inspire the pote," said her father. "Let me know when he begins writing, my child. They're terrible fellows when they once start."

"It's you I'm afraid of, father." Jack turned upon him. "You must lie low a bit. If he once suspects you of laughing at him, he'll skip. I want the poor beggar to have a chance."

"Faith ! I'll leave him to the ladies," retorted his irrepressible parent. "He won't see much of me. Oh, I'll be nice to him, you'll see. I'll sing him songs of Araby." The facetious clergyman obliged the table with a preliminary specimen of his talent.

"Father, you're too dreadful for words," Evelyn laughed.

And Jack ran off hastily to catch his train, before the poet appeared upon the scene.

It was lovely June weather, which was perhaps as well for the visitor's peace of mind. For it was natural enough that he should feel a trifle bored among these very quiet surroundings at first. Shyness among strangers had always been a pronounced trait in his character, and even with the Sugdens—a family with whom shyness was all but impossible—it took him a day or two to exorcise thoroughly his familiar spirit. He studiously avoided them whenever possible in the early days of his visit. But the country held a charm for him. He strolled idly about the fields or in the garden, and began to feel health returning with the new life—the early hours, the open air, the regular meals, and the

abstinence from strong drink. His mind began to work again—to emerge from dark obscurity into light. Life held pleasures for him still : he brightened and expanded, like some plant brought from a gloomy cellar into the sunlight and the fresh air of day. And by degrees the outer husk of self-conscious timidity shrivelled up and fell from him.

There remained, it is true, vanity enough and to spare—the self-consciousness that was an integral part of the man. And the vanity within him led him on to talk : he wished to impress these good, simple-minded denizens of the country. He posed before them, of course, but by now his pose was almost destitute of artificiality—it had become a second nature. He could not help the rapt expression that stole upon him even in the middle of a meal, or could barely help it. He had long cultivated this engaging absent-minded dreaminess, but he watched its effects keenly ; he was perfectly conscious when the others noticed it or when (for they were rather dense at times) it passed unheeded. And as time went on he would emerge from his reverie on occasion with some cryptic utterance, some startling and unexpected comment on life, perhaps some whimsical paradox. He began to discover an amusement in the way these were accepted by his hearers. Sugden, if he were present, would turn to jesting argument, for he had the logical faculty. Mrs. Sugden would pass by the most daring generalisation with a smile, as an amiable poetic madness with which she had no concern. But the girl, when her father was away, took him in a more proper spirit. She seemed impressed ; she gathered up his

pearls attentively ; she would even seek enlightenment.

“She has sympathy,” said March to himself, “and, at times, she has glimmerings of thought. Also, she really is rather pretty.” He did not know that she was acting on her brother’s injunction to draw the poet out.

Certainly, too, he was an interesting talker, of a different sort from any she had hitherto encountered. He had a tendency to monologue, but what he said was generally worth hearing. It bore the stamp of a personality, it was not coin from the common mint of polite phraseology. He had the air rather of thinking aloud—it was a piece of affectation he cultivated sedulously with ladies, with whom indeed it had proved useful more than once. An absent-minded dreamer has advantages over the ordinary conversationalist : he is privileged to say almost anything ; he can look where he will, and as long as he chooses, without offence. Yet he walked warily, at first, for he was clever in his own way.

“Women are the flowers of Life,” he said. “That they should ever work is a desecration.” His eyes, with that look of gazing into the far distance, sought Evelyn’s face and remained there.

“Well, somebody must clear away the things,” she retorted brightly, as she rose from the table and proceeded with her daily routine. “No ! you are not allowed to help : you are an invalid.”

March sat down again in an attitude of graceful lassitude. “You are all too good to me here,” he said, playing deftly upon the strings of pity. It was his cue to excite compassion. His eyes—they were fine eyes—

took on an expression of melancholy. He hinted that it was a novelty for any one to display any thought for his welfare. He was an orphan—all alone in the world.

“But you have friends, surely?” said his sympathetic listener. “Why! there’s Jack, at any rate.”

“Dear old Jack,” mused the poet, absently. “Yes! he has always been my friend—the best of friends. Was it not he who brought me here? But for him”—it was on his lips to add—“I should never have seen you,” but he refrained. On reflection it would be going too far, at present.

But she was decidedly a pretty girl, and what could be expected of a poet, stranded in a country rectory, divorced suddenly from all the pleasures of the town? Could any one suppose that he was going to stay there for a fortnight without doing something to relieve the monotony. And then she liked him—he could see that well enough. Deuce take it! it would be queer if she didn’t. Probably she never met any one more interesting than a local curate.

“And have you no others at all?” she asked, coming back from the pantry for another tray-load. They were alone, for Sugden had gone to his study long ago, and his wife was already busied with her household duties of the day.

“And yet domestic duties ennoble rather than desecrate,” murmured the dreamy guest, pursuing his train of thought. “Service beautifully rendered—by beautiful women!” He sighed and awoke. “Friends? No, Miss Sugden, not another in the world. No relations,

and one friend." He sighed again. "I have left all I possess to your brother in my will."

Evelyn had no idea how much this might signify, but she thought it rather ridiculous. "Why! Mr. March, how absurd!" she laughed. "He is older than you are, isn't he?"

"And how long do you think I shall live?" He spoke gaily, but contrived to touch a note of gentle sadness, compelling pity. "I give myself five years," he continued dreamily, "if so long."

"Oh, nonsense!" she said cheerily, folding up the cloth and putting it away in the sideboard, "you're going to get quite well again down here. Now you must go out and get some fresh air."

And March went obediently into the garden, and walked up and down with perhaps a rather exaggerated air of infirmity, wondering whether she would come out and carry on their conversation. It was curious, but he found himself looking forward quite eagerly now to these little scraps of dialogue with Evelyn. And it was pleasant to watch her; she was prettier than he had imagined. A day or two later he began to take his notebook out into the garden, and write—again possibly with rather more ostentation than was quite necessary.

Did Evelyn like him? I imagine it was chiefly compassion, and a fine sense of hospitality, that induced her to spend some of the scanty hours of her leisure in his company. After all, he looked terribly ill, poor little man! and he seemed badly in need of some one to look after him, and wonderfully anxious to talk about himself. As for his affectations—well! she supposed poets were

like that : they could not altogether help themselves. Personally, she wished he could manage to do without them. Sometimes, it must be admitted, he said things that made her feel hot all over : presumably this also was a prerogative of genius. The absent-minded air did impose on her partially : she could not bring herself to believe it was altogether put on. But she did wish he wouldn't fix his gaze upon her quite so often and so steadily, even if he did seem to be looking through her at something far away. And why on earth must he be always darkly hinting at the terrible life he led in London ? If he was really so very wicked, he might at least say nothing about it. Honestly, she could not imagine what so weak and fragile a creature could possibly have done that was so very wrong.

“ I believe you make yourself out much worse than you are,” she said, reprovingly.

“ Ah ! if I could only stay here for ever ! ” he sighed. “ But we have to experience everything, if we are to write truly about life.” It was his favourite argument : he had used it so long that he thought it peculiarly his own property.

“ Then are all poets so desperately wicked ? ” she asked with a mischievous smile.

He gathered himself together for a serious explanation of his position.

“ We are differently constituted from other men,” he said. “ Real poetry must be the fruit of intense emotion, of fierce pleasure and terrible agony, of remorse and exaltation. The passions are the fire beneath our crucible, in which the rough ore of life is melted and refined to

pure gold. We cannot suffer the fire to become extinguished." Instinctively he opened his notebook and began to transcribe the metaphor.

"Are you beginning to work again?" she queried. "Stourton is not a very inspiring place, I am afraid. There are too many stone-quarries."

"Your company would inspire me in a coal mine," he said gallantly. Which remark had the effect of reminding Evelyn that she had some more work to do in the house. She left him hurriedly.

He gave her one of his poems the next day. "I wrote this after you ran away so cruelly yesterday," he explained. It was a pretty little verse enough—the merest trifle, but delicately carved. Evelyn read it afterwards, when she was alone, and frowned over one or two passages. Still, she felt secretly flattered. And if she really inspired him, as he said, could she not make him do something worthier of himself than this? It seemed petty, unreal, artificial—all this rhyming about love—all these feigned poetic raptures and broken hearts. She could not imagine that this poor, pale, hyper-sensitive mortal could ever have had more than a passing acquaintance with the passion he was so fond of describing. "And he might be doing something really great," she said to herself. "He is clever enough." She did not distinguish very subtly between talent and genius. Evelyn was a simple child of the country, with intuitions and aspirations of her own, but not much reading; to her great poetry meant in general poetry with a cast towards religion. She supposed Shakespeare was a great poet, but this was hearsay: she felt Keble was great, from the effect he produced upon herself.

She would like, she felt, to lead March into the right path. At the back of every good woman's mind lies the instinctive desire to exercise a good influence, to reform some wayward brother. She had a sort of motherly compassion for him, too, on the physical side : he was so weak and frail. Yet he was growing better day by day. Even the compliments with which he pursued her now were, she supposed, a sign of returning sprightliness. She had not the heart to snub him, looking upon them from that standpoint. In a sense, he had been entrusted to her care. But she wished he would not be always turning the conversation upon himself and his own experiences, punctuated with discourses on the nature of love.

For March was making considerable progress in his own way. His vanity taught him to believe that the girl was attracted to him, and he set himself sedulously to fan the imagined flame. After all, it was very dull in this out-of-the-way place, and playing with a feminine heart was the only pastime that could possibly mitigate his sufferings. He thought he could see into Evelyn's as clearly as the mariner into the pellucid sea encircling a coral reef in the South Pacific. She was growing to love him : he discoursed upon the passion in the abstract with luminous eloquence, for there was a pleasure in watching the half-timorous unfolding (as he thought) of her secret heart. And he himself, he sighed to think, was ever only too susceptible to the charms of the sex. He was positively getting to like the girl.

“ We are but as clay in the hands of a pretty woman,” reflected this Lothario.

• The faintest spark of passion glowed in his feeble breast. Fanned by idleness, and the return of some measure of health, it might spread to a conflagration. But his poetic soul revolted from the thought of marriage. To think of being tied down for life—even to the most charming woman in the world ! An eagle with clipped wings, a Pegasus haltered in the stable. He shook his head with a wise smile. This was but play : if she took it seriously—so much the worse for her. He shrugged his shoulders. “ I have no wish to hurt them ; but if the pretty creatures will play with fire, they must take the consequences,” was his amiable pronouncement. He at any rate was safe enough. And a poet, when all was said, must have certain privileges.

CHAPTER XXV

“WHAT a fist the fellow writes !” said Jack Sugden, struggling to piece together a letter that he had just received, bearing the Stourton postmark and addressed in the curiously angular hand-writing of Theodore March. “And he seems to have used all the scraps of paper he could find in the wastepaper basket. Poets are a curious breed.”

“Who’s your friend ?” asked Durrant, in idle curiosity. They were breakfasting together in his flat before proceeding to the Temple on the business of the day. “I thought it was one of your people writing left-handed. Hasn’t it got a Stourton postmark ?”

Jack laughed. “It has, my eagle-eyed friend. How the study of law sharpens the faculties ! He is among them, but not of them. He’s a poet, called March, and I took him down there about ten days back to recruit. Didn’t I tell you ?”

“No ; you did not. Is he the man you found drunk in the street ? A nice sort of chap to introduce to a respectable family.”

“Well, he can’t get drunk down there—unless he goes to the village pub, and I took care of that for him. No ; I took him down, frankly, to cure the poor beggar.

He was killing himself, not by inches but by feet. And I told him to let me know how he was getting on. I shall get through with it in time. 'Your unstable family affects me strangely.' What the deuce does the chap mean? Oh! it may be 'amiable.' 'Your amiable family'—that's better—'attracts me strongly.' Well, that's nice of him. 'I am a——' heavens! what's this? 'Irritable locust-eater,' it looks like." He sighed in despair.

"Try lotus-eater, it's more poetical," Durrant suggested sardonically. The idea of an unknown dipsomaniac of a poet residing at Stourton did not altogether please him.

"Good! 'a veritable lotus-eater.' That's more like it. I hope he finds the food healthy. Hullo! here's some more on the back of this sheet. Come! I can read this—it's verse. Why on earth should he write verse to me? It's a rough draft, I suppose. He's a sparing man with his paper." He pondered over the fragment with a frown.

"Out with it," said Durrant. "Give me the benefit of the poetry."

"H'm! I take it this is what they call his later manner. Don't care for it much myself, but it may appeal to you. He's a funny little beggar—makes himself out no end of a blackguard in his verse. Here you are:—

"Sweet, I have wandered through a wilderness
Of foul desire,
My soul is scarred with Passion's fierce caress
As with a sword of fire.

And yet thou lovest me, sweet saint, confess !
Nay, blush not in distress !
Thou dost but stoop to raise me from the mire."

Durrant rose abruptly from the table with an expression of anger that astonished the reader. He walked to the window and stood there, looking out into the street. Then he wheeled round suddenly.

"Stuff like that sickens me," he said. "The man who could write that filth must have a mind like a cess-pool."

Jack looked at him with wide eyes. "Oh ! come now, it's not as bad as all that," he explained. "You don't know March : he doesn't mean half he says. It's just a way these poets have, you know."

"Then the sooner they get out of it the better," snapped Durrant, who was in no mood to receive excuses. "The little cur !" He paced the room in evident perturbation. He did not know what to do. Should he make a clean breast of it and tell her brother everything ? He brought himself to a halt and regarded his friend with a fixed and rather discomposing gaze.

"Well, what's wrong ?" Jack asked innocently. "I don't care much for the stuff myself, but the poor little beggar can't help himself, I suppose. The leopard can't change his spots, even with the aid of Pears' soap. You look as if it was a personal affront."

Durrant faced him squarely.

"You don't see what it means," he said. "The man's in love with your sister."

"Nonsense ! I tell you the man always writes that sort of stuff. He can't help himself. Why should you

think he is? Besides, Evy's not his sort at all. I don't think it's in the least likely." Nevertheless he frowned at the offending lines, considering. The suggestion did not please him either.

"My dear fellow," said Durrant slowly, "it's no good your talking. I know it. The man's in love with your sister because he can't help himself. Nobody could stay down there a week without falling in love with her —head over ears."

"Why, hang it, man, you've stayed there yourself."

"That's why I know. If she'll have me, I mean to marry her."

Jack stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed. Then he sprang up with a laugh and gripped him by the hand.

"Good man! I'm thundering glad to hear it. And you've been lying low all the time, you old ruffian. Dash me! I never suspected you for a moment."

Durrant shrugged his shoulders with a faint smile. "I don't suppose she suspects it either," he said. "That's the trouble. Here's this mangy poet of yours on the spot, writing verses to her and all that sort of thing, and I've never said a word. I tell you," he added with sudden energy, "if anything happens over this, it's my own fault. I was a fool. I ought to have taken the chance when I had it. For all I know, it may be too late now."

But Jack was cheerfully optimistic.

"Too late!" he exclaimed. "Skittles! you're right as a rock rabbit. I tell you, she's not that sort, and I know her pretty well. I told her to be kind to the poor

chap—and he was looking fit to die any moment. My dear fellow, I was never better pleased with anything in my life. It's just magnificent."

"Thanks, old chap. It's awfully good of you to take it like that. But—well! I could wish your friend was not down there. If he's an invalid, as you say, she'll be sorry for him, and when a girl feels pity for any one you can't tell what will happen. I know your family: you are all too compassionate by a long way." He smiled. "And sometimes you get badly left in consequence."

"Well, bring it to the point," suggested the practical brother. "Run down to-day and get it over. Nothing like action in an emergency."

Durrant sighed. "I thought of it," he assented, "but it can't be done. I've an important case on to-day. I sha'n't be free till Saturday."

"That's bad." Jack reflected a moment with bent brows. "Why not write?"

Durrant resumed his pacing up and down the little room, considering. "I'd wire, if it wouldn't be all over the village. Writing seems poor, doesn't it? Fancy sending a proposal by post. And she wouldn't get it until to-morrow morning. It's slow and mean-spirited, and they don't like it—at least, so they say. It might spoil the whole show."

"Evy's not that kind of girl," reiterated Jack. "You try. If you're in such a hurry send a district messenger boy. One went to America the other day—on a similar errand."

The lover faced round abruptly. "Jack, I believe you're a genius," he exclaimed. "I'll do it." He sat

down promptly to the writing table and took a sheet of paper.

Down at Stourton Rectory Theodore March had been basking in the sun all the bright morning, revolving many thoughts in his poetic soul, while in the background the fussy little engines of the stone quarries puffed to and fro, dragging and pushing their trucks of solid granite, and the crushing machine (its tall chimney emitting dense clouds of smoke) clattered noisily in the middle distance. These intrusive sounds of base mechanical employ disturbed him but slightly : the visitor to Stourton grows in a day or two to regard them as little as the Londoner notices the persistent roar of street traffic. Perhaps they even affected him pleasantly, giving a zest to his idleness. He lay on a rug on the lawn, a notebook by his side, in which he recorded from time to time some fleeting impression, but for the most part he contented himself with gazing at the blue smoke curling upwards from his cigarette, or at the fleecy white clouds drifting slowly across the sky. He was pleased with himself, for he felt new harmonies stirring within his soul. Health was returning and bringing with her (like the approaching autumn) golden and plenteous crops. He had written a new poem last night, and he thought that it was good. It was not altogether bad : the tortured words had in them a spark of real feeling.

This Arcadian simplicity was not without its charm, he reflected. What if he were to abandon the great city, with its noise and bustle and weltering mob of

workers, and become a new man—the poet of simple tastes, the apostle of country joys ! His swift mind ran rapidly through a succession of shifting scenes : he saw himself in varying moods, in divers places ; but somehow the general effect was hardly satisfactory. No ! he could never live in the country for any length of time : already London was calling to him : he wanted once more to get among people who knew his name, who were conversant (at least for purposes of dialogue) with the latest in art and literature, who deferred to his opinion as poet and critic. And yet he knew within himself what it would mean—to get back again. He would slip back into the pit. Sargent was there, and his little coterie of admirers ; temptations lay in wait for him on every side, and he saw himself surrendering to them almost without an effort. For in his thoughts he was honest enough : he arrogated to himself no sort of courage, moral or physical ; he saw himself a coward at heart, and moralised upon it in his angular hand as he lay upon the rug in the warm sunlight.

“Is not courage, after all,” he wrote, “a much over-rated quality ? The physiologist will explain cowardice : 'tis the result merely of temporary paralysis of the right ventricle. Why, then, should it be considered more disgraceful than other manifestations of ill-health ?”

He started to invent a similar apophthegm on the subject of Love, but found it difficult to construct one to his satisfaction. Too many had tried their hands on it : he felt that his mind was obscured by reminiscence.

“As in the fable of Eros and Psyche,” he wrote at

last, "we see that Love perishes when examined too closely. The fool alone pauses to analyse his sensations ; the wise are content to enjoy."

He descended from the general to the particular. "I wish she would come out," he murmured petulantly. He could see the glint of her white dress as she moved to and fro in the drawing-room, dusting the ornaments, and it inflamed his imagination. She moved gracefully : it was always a pleasure to watch her. Might it not be almost worth while to marry, and settle down, and live cleanly ? He saw well enough that it might be infernally dull, after a time ; but it would be healthy, and he was beginning to appreciate the advantages of health. Also, he felt a godlike pity for the girl : she was so obviously attracted by him. At the worst it would be a new sensation. He resolved that if she came out before lunch he would take her a walk round the fruit garden. There was a summer-house at the end of the path—an ideal spot for the purpose.

But she did not come out that morning, as had been her custom, and March felt vaguely that he had been defrauded of his just rights. He heard a ring at the bell, echoing faintly in the distance, and shortly afterwards Evelyn disappeared from the drawing-room and was seen no more. When they met at luncheon he noticed that there was an unusual touch of colour in her cheeks. Sugden was out in the parish.

"I saw nothing of you all the morning," he said reproachfully. "Were you hard at work all the time ?"

Mother and daughter exchanged a swift glance, and the latter blushed prettily.

“Were you very lonely ?” she laughed gaily. “I was rather busy, but I shall be free this afternoon. Shall we play croquet ?”

The poet smiled in his most engaging manner. “For the pleasure of your society I would even play croquet,” he said. “But I do not love games, and croquet is perhaps the most trying to the temper of any I know.”

“Well, you shall read me some poetry.” She smiled upon him so graciously that he determined to read her something very strong indeed.

But when it came to the point he read her no poetry at all. For it was three o’clock before she joined him in the garden, and his vanity was hurt at the delay.

“I thought you were never coming,” he said, with the rather imperious air he had sometimes assumed of late. “This has been the dullest day I remember spending in this enchanted land.”

“Poor Stourton,” she laughed. “Is it an enchanted land ? Only to a poet, I am afraid. It is very smoky to-day. But I love the dear old place.” She looked round the garden with the suspicion of a sigh. “I have lived here all my life, you see.”

He led her insensibly towards the path. “Let us come where we shall be out of the sun,” he urged. She was prettier than ever to-day, he thought, and his veins tingled with admiration. But she should pay for her tardiness. He would see to that.

They sat down together in the summer house.

“It is very pretty,” he said, looking straight at the delicate lines of her profile.

"I suppose it is," she replied simply. "I don't think I ever liked it all quite so much before."

"But not only the garden," he added insidiously, seeking for his opportunity.

Evelyn was lost for the moment in contemplation. She awoke with a start.

"Not only the garden? Well, I suppose the church is rather pretty too—and the house. They are like old friends to me."

He forbore to press it to a hasty conclusion. There were other methods of attack, and it was amusing to play with his victim.

"Have you always been happy here?" he asked.

She looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows. "Are any of us always happy?" She paused, and smiled. "I am very happy to-day," she said. There was a light in her innocent blue eyes.

"Why to-day?" He thought he could tell the reason, but it pleased him to force a confession.

"Ah! I can't tell you, Mr. March." She looked at him almost mischievously. Was she, after all, leading him on? The thought damped him for a moment; he would rather have her coy, timid, yielding half-reluctantly.

"I think I can guess," he said, after a moment's pause.

Rather to his surprise, she burst into sudden laughter. "I'm sure you can do nothing of the kind," she affirmed with decision. "At least, I hope not." Her face crimsoned at the bare supposition of anything so dreadful.

This was clear as daylight, he reflected.

“There is no true happiness without love,” hazarded the poet, smiling at her simplicity, and saw that he had hit the mark. She looked at him in sudden affright for the loss of her secret.

“What makes you say that?” she asked in a rather unsteady voice.

“Do you think I am blind?” he laughed in return. “It is written in your sweet eyes, in every line of your pretty face.”

She rose, startled. “Mr. March, you really must not talk like that.” He had paid her compliments before, and she had accepted them, as from a poet, whose language was necessarily tinged in stronger colours than the ordinary, but he had never spoken quite so boldly as this. Yet she shrank from hurting him, and he meant to be kind. She forced a smile. “I know you don’t really mean it,” she said, “but please don’t say such things again.”

“The little witch!” he said to himself, and rose also. “But I do mean it,” he exclaimed triumphantly, “and you know I mean it——” and before she realised what he was doing he caught her in his arms and kissed her on the neck. He kissed her twice before he was conscious of a tingling box on the ear.

She tore herself free and stood flushed and panting, with unmistakeable anger in her eyes. With an effort she controlled herself to speak, standing haughtily erect.

“I am sorry if I hurt you,” she said coldly. “I should have remembered you were ill. And you should

have remembered you were a gentleman, and my guest. I hope I shall never see you again."

She walked away swiftly towards the house, and March was left alone, blank astonishment turning to sullen rage in his mind. He sat there in moody silence for five minutes, thought chasing thought with ever-increasing velocity, till a sudden frenzy took him, and he burst into a torrent of oaths. Then he picked up his hat, which had fallen under the table, and walked blindly out of the garden into the high road. He would go back to London ; he had been a fool ever to leave it. Curse these interfering Sugdens, every one of them ! He turned his face away from the village and walked along the dusty road without pausing to think where he was going. A mile or so away from the village he came to a sign-post and a cross-road—the main road to Leicester. He paused, his brain still simmering with rage, and sat down on the grass, for he was no walker, and he was conscious already that his feet were getting sore. Then he noticed for the first time that he had come away in his thin shoes.

For a moment profound self-pity seized him, and he felt the tears welling up in his eyes. For he had really loved the girl, he said to himself. He pictured her as she had stood there, before the climax, smiling and half afraid, flushed with a tender colour ; he saw her tripping down the garden to meet him, or moving gracefully about the house on her duties, always bright and pretty and cheerful. She might have saved him—that girl—and she had deliberately thrown him back into the gutter. For now he persuaded himself that what he had

wanted all the time was to marry her—to settle down quietly, a reformed character, and forswear evil courses. He was gradually becoming attuned to simple habits, to a sober and quiet life. He loved her; she could have led him wheresoever she wished. And now——

“She had but to stretch forth her hand to pluck me from the pit,” he mused. With a savage oath he added, “She deliberately struck me down as I was climbing out. She has wrecked my life.”

He rose in a sudden frenzy and shook his fist at the spire of Stourton Church, still visible among the trees. His mood changed, and he laughed bitterly.

“Who cares?” he said aloud. “I am going back to hell, but I’ll have a good time before I get there. Oh! you poor, narrow, cramped fools.” He saw himself a glorious fallen angel, entertained unawares in that abode of the commonplace. They did not know the treasure that had dwelt in their house—a god prepared to wed with one of the daughters of men; they had scorned him and cast him forth. Very good! it was their own loss. He turned and walked on quickly, driven with gusts of rage. If his feet were sore, so much the better; it was another count in the long indictment against his enemies. He limped swiftly towards Leicester, and when he trod upon a sharp stone he swore aloud. There were eight miles to go. A fortnight ago he could not have done it, but now he plodded on steadily, driven by the one fixed thought of getting back as quickly as possible to the old life. And at last, some two hours later, he found himself entering the outskirts of a town. Crossing the canal bridge, he happened—wonder of wonders!—upon

a hansom cab. March was weary to death of walking ; he hailed it.

“Drive to the railway station,” he said, and leant back with a sigh of relief.

The driver opened his trap-door. “Beg pardon, sir— which station ?”

“Any you like, curse you.” March was stung to rage again in a moment. But as the man drove off he thrust his hand upwards and shouted “London.” And, jolting over the roughly-paved streets of the country town they came at last to a main street with shops on either side and tall buildings. March bethought himself suddenly that he was faint. His hand went up again.

“Stop at the first decent hotel,” he called. He wanted something to pick himself up with before starting on a journey. “Somewhere near the station.”

The cab pulled up with a jolt before a new red-brick building, and March stumbled out. He had not realised before how painfully sore and stiff he was. He paid the fare and looked round with contemptuous eyes. Well, this would serve his turn as well as another. Presumably they kept whiskey here, at all events.

“*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate,*” he quoted, with cynical laughter.

CHAPTER XXVI

MARCH entered the hotel door, and asked when the next train left for London. There was an hour to wait. He was tired and exhausted with the unaccustomed exercise ; it was many years since he had taken a ten-mile walk at a stretch. He wanted to sit down and think ; he wanted something to pick himself up with.

“ Show me a private room,” he said, “ and bring me a bottle of your best Irish and a few biscuits.” What was there to keep him back now ? He was no longer a prisoner, a child under restraint, to be watched jealously by a pack of one-idea’d fools. He would do as he pleased. Whiskey ! he had almost forgotten the taste of it. Now they would see : he would show that girl how much he cared for the lot of them. He would take his revenge by deliberately returning to the pit, by casting down of his own motion the fragile edifice of self-respect they had built with so much labour to fence off the danger. He sat down on an easy chair and poured out a generous glass. His eyes lit up with a sombre satisfaction ; he sipped the sparkling liquid, and it warmed his heart. It was almost worth while to have waited so

long for this. He stretched his limbs luxuriously and made a pretence of nibbling at a biscuit.

“I don’t care a curse for anybody,” he said savagely, with sudden energy. “I hate the whole lot of them —the girl too. May she shrivel up like a rotten apple !”

He drank again. His brain began to seethe with furious denunciations. They crowded upon his lips and he declaimed them to the empty walls. What did he care ? Here was his comfort, his panacea for all earthly evils. Was it not noble stuff ? He could think of her now with lofty scorn, with a sort of tolerant pity. The poor narrow set, the cramped and fettered life they led ! Religion—*ligare*, to bind—etymologists might object, but that was good enough for him. He would be bound no longer ; he was free. There was his creed, the good old creed preached by Sargent, a better creed than this country-bred, narrow superstition. *Religio quantum potuit suadere malorum*—was not that the tag ? He sipped more of the generous fluid, and his brain responded readily, soaring to the empyrean. What a poem he could write now—freedom his text ! What a satire on the life they led down in holes like this ! Pah ! He loathed the provinces. Back to London again, where men thought and talked and drank and lived without caring what their fellows might think. Good old Sargent ! he would be a fine tonic after these weeks of cold obstruction.

When a tender thought came unbidden into his mind he could choke it down now, kill it, put it away without a pang. He had but to drink and it was gone. He saw

himself now a different being ; he looked upon his false self of a few hours ago as something unreal, unnatural. That was not the real Theodore March : it was a poor starved reflection. He saw it all now, with the piercing eyes of keen self-analysis, sharpened with whiskey. They had kept him low—that was the secret of their influence ; they had captured him and denied him his proper stimulus. There was no saying what a man might do in these conditions. If he had stayed there any longer he might have become even as one of themselves. Had he not dreamed, for a few fleeting moments, of marriage and a country life ? To think of it ! Theodore March, poet and philosopher, married to a country girl ! He laughed aloud as he filled up his glass again.

He had eaten nothing for some five hours and the spirit mounted rapidly in his brain. His was the glorious sensation of a keen disembodied intellect, floating somewhere aloft in the neighbourhood of the ceiling, regarding the tired, footsore carcase below with a sort of indulgent, pitying laughter. This detached mind of his attained to unimagined heights of cynicism, most comforting to wounded pride. It became sententious, acute, penetrating ; it exposed pitilessly the ignoble element lurking in all emotion ; it analysed Love and beheld it stripped to the bone—an unlovely skeleton. It gave him a pleasing sense of power to reflect that, now whiskey had restored him to his true self, he could weigh dispassionately this fancied passion of his, and find it inappreciably small. What was there in the girl worthy of remark ? A clear skin, blue eyes, waving hair, a

passable figure. The rest was pure imagination, added virtues drawn from his own fancy. There were prettier girls elsewhere—hundreds of them—to be had for the asking.

“Love is the desire for contact with another epidemis,” was the phrase in which he summed up the great passion. He had kissed her, anyway; his only regret now was that he had stopped so soon. Hang the girl! it was only put on, that affectation of innocence. She liked it really; they all liked it—if you went on long enough. He should have held her tight, and gone on until she gave in. Masculine superiority. The disembodied spirit had not, perhaps, the keenest sense of humour. But the dull body felt its ear tingling, and swore aloud. Shameful thought! The girl had struck him and he had taken no revenge. He drank, to drown the memory of the deadly insult.

His eye wandered to the clock, and he realised hazily that it was time to be going. He rang the bell, and paid, and walked out into the street, his head whirling with tumultuous half-formed thoughts. He limped no longer now, though his feet were still sore, for he could only keep a straight line by moving swiftly, and it seemed to him that his head was a balloon, captive to his body, in which sat a watchful pilot directing his course. He steered his way through the traffic fearless and undismayed. A first-class ticket, for he wished to be alone; and a flask of whiskey, for he must have something to keep his heart up on the journey. Was it not sad that the stimulus so soon failed of its effect? The express rolled smoothly in, and he found an empty carriage.

He sat with his feet up on the cushions opposite, sipping more of the generous liquid from his flask, and his soul was filled with content. He was on his way to London again at last—back to London, the home of pleasure, where a man could do as he pleased, and it was possible to kiss a girl without being repulsed with contumely. He could take his revenge there, vicariously at all events ; he could punish her by plunging unchecked into every form of dissipation. He would make a night of it when he got back—a wild, whirling, Walpurgis night that should scatter to the four winds the last remnants of self-restraint. He schemed it out in his head as the express plunged onward, through fields reflecting the mellow light of a sinking sun. He would get something to eat as soon as he got in, and then on to a music-hall. Anything to take the taste of the country out of his mouth.

There was a delightful sense of freedom in this sudden dash for liberty. He felt something like an escaped convict. The prison walls of Stourton were receding behind him ; he had nothing to hold him back—not even a travelling bag to look after—and money enough to pay for everything he might desire. What could be pleasanter ? He smiled grimly to think of the Sugdens sitting down to dinner and wondering what had become of their guest. Let them wonder—the silly fools ! Was he not a poet, and a recognised eccentric ? What was the use of his reputation unless he acted up to it sometimes ? But, after all, he didn't want a fuss made ; he would wire to say he had been called back suddenly on important business.

A sudden impulse seized him, and he opened the window and hurled out his half-finished flask on the line. The night was all before him ; it was no use getting drunk too early, or there would be no fun. He applauded himself for his noble self-denial.

“Another drink and I should have been incapable,” he reflected, nodding his head with portentous gravity. Already he felt himself growing sleepy. He went into the lavatory, and, steadying himself with some little difficulty, doused his head with cold water.

“The ordinary man,” pronounced the poet, solemnly, “would have been powerless to pull up in time. I have a mission to perform. I have strength of mind enough to keep on the verge—to balance myself on the brink. And, by Jove ! it’s no easy matter in an express train.”

He meditated upon his new-born strength of character, and his soul swelled with satisfaction. He controlled his actions with difficulty, like an inexperienced driver handling a coach-and-four for the first time, but the team still obeyed him well enough. When the train drew up at St. Pancras he remembered the telegraph office, and sent off his message. He confined himself to a single glass at dinner, smiling approbation at his own foresight. Then he ordered special coffee and one of their best cigars, for his thoughts were bent upon luxury. It was just nine o’clock when he commanded a hansom and drove off in the direction of Leicester Square. Scrivener’s Inn did not receive him until the sun was high in the heavens next morning.

CHAPTER XXVII

“ I WISH I were dead,” he moaned miserably at intervals. He lay on his back, half-undressed, in his dingy bedroom, gazing at the unlovely prospect of fantastic chimney-pots twisting in all manner of extraordinary shapes. To him they suggested devouring serpents. The inevitable reaction had come upon him stronger than ever. Once more he had fallen into the pit. No ; not fallen—he had walked into it deliberately, of set purpose, his eyes open. And now he saw in a different light all that he had sacrificed to get there. He had turned his back on purity and health and happiness, to purchase half an hour’s delirium that turned to ashes even while he tasted it. He loathed himself, and his head throbbed like a steam-hammer.

“ I give it up,” he reiterated aloud. “ I give it up. It’s no good fighting against fate. It is written that I am to kill myself. I shall perish miserably like a dog.”

And all the time, at the back of his mind, he was possessed by a fierce resentment against himself. He had been through all this before a hundred times ; he knew it all by heart, and there was no longer even the

pleasure of novelty in it. Time after time he had found himself lying there in the morning, uttering precisely the same lamentations, filled with the same self-contempt, and he knew it would all happen again, in exactly the same damnable routine. Was there, then, no extraneous power he could call in to his assistance? What was the use? He had been helped; friendly hands had dragged him up to the light of day—to sanity and a measure of returning health—and he had nullified all the good in a single paroxysm of madness. They might drag him out again, if they had the patience to try, but it would only be for a moment. He saw himself impelled again, by a sort of fatal curiosity, to the edge of destruction. He would begin by testing his strength, by playing with the danger; he would end, as he always ended, by one false step that would send him sliding easily to the bottom. Yes; he knew every step of the journey well enough by now.

Besides, who could help him? Not the Sugdens—he had cut himself off from them irretrievably. A gust of hot shame swept over him, for now he was a different man: the sentimental had the upper hand, and he wept weak tears of self-abasement. Happiness had been in his grasp, and he had cast the jewel away; he had thrown it on the ground and stamped upon it with his heel. Why had this madness come upon him? Was he always to be possessed of devils?

“I am fit for nothing,” he moaned again. It came upon him in a sudden flash of self-depreciation that he was not good enough for that girl, that he was unworthy to associate with her. He said to himself that he was

glad she had scorned him. For in his moments of repentance March was capable (as we all are capable) of a certain nobility of sentiment. The devil in him momentarily appeased and satiate, he caught occasional glimpses of the true path. *Vidit meliora probavitque*—for the moment. And, indeed, the loftiest thoughts, the highest and purest ideals are often those which present themselves to the libertine in his matutinal reflections. They may not last long, but they shine gloriously for a time.

Blackness descended again upon him like a pall. There was nothing left to live for now ; it was no good continuing the struggle. His quick imagination suggested a sudden and tragic end, obituary notices—“Sad End of a Promising Career”—perhaps a run on his published works for a few weeks, and then—oblivion. Yet would it not be better to commit suicide, to put an end to the whole sordid business at once, than to drag on miserably in this fashion, dying by inches ? Better to end suddenly, with a splash, than to flicker out, growing dimmer through a succession of years, forgotten perhaps before the last scene came.

He rose, or rather rolled, off his bed, and stood dizzily on the floor. He would kill himself—or at all events he would think about killing himself. At the back of his mind he was almost certain that he would do nothing of the sort, but there was always a chance ; he might find courage to obey a momentary impulse, courage for one slash across the throat with a razor. He opened the case and took out the shining weapon. He could wish it done. He pictured himself lying on the floor in a pool of blood, the centre of a curious, sympathetic throng.

“Poor fellow—what a pity !” they would say. “The world at his feet—a rising poet—and here he lies.” The whisper would go round—“Drink ?” He heard it in various tones, interrogative, affirmative, commiserating. This was all well enough, but the shimmer of the steel affected him with an uncomfortable sensation. He raised it to his throat, and set it down again with a shiver. He could never do it : he felt it all too vividly beforehand. He must find some easier way.

Besides, there were arrangements to be made first. It would never do to die like this without an explanation, without a valedictory epistle to the world. The meanest bank clerk, blowing out his brains on some suburban common, leaves some sort of a letter behind him. Here was a great soul about to cut itself loose from the world ; it was his duty to leave a legacy of noble thought. He washed himself, put on a dressing-gown, and crawled into his sitting-room. It did not matter now : he had given up the struggle ; and he filled himself a tumbler with a sigh of infinite pathos. When the night came he would put an end to it all. Now there was work to be done, and he must tune himself up to the proper pitch. He opened a box and took out a book of manuscript. “Confessions of a Poet,” it was lettered on the outside. There was another chapter of searching self-analysis to be added before he could leave his testament complete.

He sat and wrote, and the artist in him overpowered the material man, so that he forgot for a time his aching head and parched throat. He detailed, with absolute scrupulousness, the events of the past fortnight, veiling the identity of place and persons with initials, as is his

wont throughout the book. He wrote steadily for two hours. The eloquent passage at the close, following upon the words, "I linger one moment in the vestibule," suffused him with a rosy glow of melancholy admiration.

"I linger one moment in the vestibule before I pass into the chamber where Death sits—Death the bride, awaiting the advent of her lover. There is a smile on her pure, pale face, a smile of infinite longing, for she welcomes—oh, how gladly!—those who enter her gloomy portals of their own free will, unafraid. For them she smiles; for them she stretches out her magnificent arms, white and cold as Pentelican marble, that have but to touch the fevered brow one moment to cool for ever its throbbing fire. Do I shrink before her starry eyes? Oh, glorious, pale divinity, centuries of craven fear oppressed me, but I have cast them off. See! I come towards you eagerly, your suppliant, your lover."

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes wet with tears. For a few minutes he permitted himself the luxury of imagining how the hardened reviewers, reading this his last will and testament, would break down at this point and weep with mingled admiration and regret. He would never see their notices. It was a pity, but it could not be helped. Others would read them; perhaps even she would see one at Stourton Rectory. He forgave her now—forgave her freely—for he was carried away on the high tide of sentiment. And now he would write

to Sugden, and give him instructions. There was a curious satisfaction to him in settling all the preliminaries to the great plunge. He liked to persuade himself that it was inevitable ; he wished to take some step that should make him unable to retreat.

It was past four o'clock when March opened his door cautiously and passed out to post the letter. He did not wish to meet Sargent just now. His mind was in a curious state ; he did not know himself what he really wished. He had some vague idea of leaving everything to the chance working of Providence. Sugden would get that letter, in all probability, when he got home in the evening ; he would come up to the Inn at once, almost to a certainty. It was possible that he might arrive in time—and thus there was still left a loophole of escape with which he might play, as it were, hovering on the brink of destruction. It would be something to know that some one was coming—even if he were lying dead on the floor. For to March's morbid imagination, which pictured the future too vividly for his comfort, it was terrible to think of his cold body lying there uncared for, silent, lonely, until his laundress came to open the door in the morning.

His veering mind was swept round first by a gust of passionate self-abasement, and then by a counter current of sober reason. Should he put an end to it all ? Well, in the end it would make little enough difference. A few months more, and the question would be settled for him. He walked slowly and languidly along the pavement, jostled by the hurrying crowd. A chance blow that sent him for the moment into the gutter intensified

his disgust of the whole busy, struggling world. He would soon be rid of them, the fools. To despise life —was not this to hold the key to all philosophies? A chemist's shop came suddenly into his view, and he turned in almost instinctively.

“Let me see, sir; have we served you before?” asked the man behind the counter when March demanded laudanum. Reassured upon this point he handed over the precious bottle. March felt a sort of lofty scorn of all things mundane as he walked out of the shop with the packet in his hand. This was the right death for your man of sensibility and refinement—a sleep from which there was no awakening—a quiet and seemly ending of life. He could find courage for that. A mere draught, and all would be over.

But he had eaten no breakfast, and though not hungry he was faint from want of food. Even if he were to die that night he must eat in the meantime. He entered an Aerated Bread Shop and called for two poached eggs and a cup of cocoa. The mere act of eating somehow revived the old debate in his mind. He felt better, for the moment. And yet, was it worth while to drag on a useless existence? To-morrow or the next day it would have to come. There was the night to pass, and how was he to get through the night without some stimulus? He would see, when the time came. At any rate he held now the solution of the difficulty; it was there, ready to his hand when the hour called for it.

He crept back to his rooms again, unwrapped the bottle and placed it in the cupboard, and sat down to think. The momentary revival was soon succeeded by

a fit of blackest melancholy. He gazed out of his window at the trees in the courtyard, their leaves yellowing in the afternoon sun, and sighed heavily at the blank misery of existence. The dusty room oppressed him, the roar of the traffic outside beat upon his ears with a dull, persistent monotony. And he might still have been in the country, healthy, or at all events on the road to health, and as happy as man could reasonably hope to be, but for his own madness. He flung himself into a chair and groaned aloud. The whiskey bottle stood there on the table, where he had left it in the morning ; he poured himself out a glass, almost without thinking, and began to drink.

He sipped, and by degrees the cloud was lifted from his mind, descending now only at intervals, like the last wreaths of mist slowly dissipated by a rising breeze. He filled another glass, and began to think of his late condition with an amused and pitying smile. What fools men were—even the wisest of them ! At the mercy of every chance circumstance they vacillated to and fro. His digestion had been upset ; he had been weak and low, unequal to the sudden outburst of the night before, and there he had lain, sunk in an abyss of the profoundest misery, magnifying mole hills until they had appeared as mountains to his distorted vision. Why, what had he done after all ? There were hundreds of others in London who had spent the night no more wisely than himself, going about their work as usual and not thinking any the worse of themselves. He wanted a little medicine, that was all ; and here was the best medicine he could take. In moderation, whiskey could hurt no man.

"I was moped," he explained to himself, "moped and solitary. Old Sargent's the man—why didn't I look him up before? I was a fool."

He went across the passage and hammered at the opposite door. But Sargent was out. March returned to his room.

"He'll be in before nine," he said to himself, a trifle sulkily. "I'll hail him when he comes upstairs. He must have gone out to feed."

He sipped, and meditated, and sipped again. Another March—the March of the evening before—gradually took possession of his body. He laughed aloud to think of the poor fool who had been masquerading in his likeness a few hours before. Why, the girl was nothing to him. A silly, puritanical, straight-laced little fool. He had treated her too leniently; she deserved worse than kissing. Curse her, and she had had the impertinence to strike him. What would Sargent say if he heard the tale? Sargent should hear something different, he would see to that—the tale with variations. He began to desire companionship as the spirit mounted to his head; he wished to talk again—good, free talk, not the polite jargon one is forced to give to school-girls and country clergymen.

A step sounded outside when March was almost weary of waiting. He called aloud as it approached.

"Sargent! Come in and have a talk. I'm back again."

"And where the devil have you been all this time?" Sargent ~~Hederson~~ turned the handle and entered the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

M ARCH leaned back in his chair and laughed—an unnatural, high-pitched laugh.

“Where have I been?” he echoed. “In hell—or in the country, which comes to much the same thing. Undergoing the rest cure.” He breathed deeply. “Another week of it would have done for me, I believe. It was one long nightmare.”

Sargent’s eyes roved round the room with a cynical expression.

“And so you proceed to take the taste out of your mouth,” he said in his quiet drawl. “You seem to have lost no time. Got any to spare?” He indicated the bottle with an almost imperceptible motion of the hand. “I don’t know that I’ve been preternaturally lively myself the last few days.”

March brought out a glass and filled it. “You look as if you’d been living with ghosts,” he said cheerfully. It was wonderful how his spirits soared aloft when once the oppressing clouds were shaken off. “Take some of this: it’ll set you up in no time. I want to talk. I’ve had no one but a clergyman, his wife and daughter to

speak to for the last fortnight. My intellect is asphyxiated."

Sargent took a long draught and raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

"Where did you say it was?" he asked languidly.

"Sugden's place. He took me down there—fairly carried me off by main force. He won't get me to go again in a hurry."

"Oh, it was there, was it?" There was the faintest suspicion of a frown on Sargent's forehead. "Sugden with you? I suppose not."

"No! Even old Sugden would have been better than nothing. The place was dull as ditch-water. If it hadn't been for the girl I should have died."

His hearer regarded him steadily without any apparent interest.

"So there is a Miss Sugden?" he remarked lazily, after a pause. "Pretty?"

The poet brushed back his hair with a smile of conscious superiority. "Well, she has her attractions," he admitted. "We were very good friends—rather too good, towards the end. I confess I could never see a girl with any pretensions to good looks without making love to her. But I can't engage to marry them all, you know." He laughed complacently. "I found her—rather warm. Fairly had to run for it, at last."

"Ah, she's that sort," said Sargent, with the same listless air. His eyes were fixed upon the speaker, but he saw nothing. He was thinking—thinking very hard—for all his face was impassive as a painted mask. Underneath a sufficiently calm exterior his blood was

beginning to seethe and bubble, like pitch in a cauldron. For his nerves were all on edge, frayed and ragged, and strained to breaking-point, and each word that the poet said seemed to set them quivering. Yet he controlled himself with a great effort.

“All lies,” he said to himself, to calm the tumult within him. “All damned lies.” Aloud, in the same level voice as before, “I gather the young lady threw herself at your head.”

March shrugged his shoulders. Inspired by drink his adventures were always worth hearing: he was trammelled by no respect for abstract truth. And just now he thought it a fine opportunity to take his revenge on the silly girl who had repulsed him. He could never drink but the vanity of the man came swiftly to the surface; in his cups he posed regularly as the heartless libertine. The affectation had amused Sargent in the past; it amused him no longer now.

“I say nothing,” said the deceiver of women, with an inimitable gesture. “But—the country is not always so much purer than the town.”

Sargent gave a short laugh. “You were always an infernal little liar,” he said smoothly. He was conscious of a curious buzzing in the temples, but he still spoke with an admirably quiet modulation. He extracted a cigarette from his case and lit it slowly.

The fire of intoxication was working in March’s brain. He began to talk volubly.

“I am a liar, am I?” he said. “Now, look here, I’ll tell you the whole story, if you promise not to mention it to any one. Sugden’s a good chap—in his

way—and I don't want to hurt him. Say you won't tell Sugden."

"Why should I?" Sargent rose suddenly. "Look here," he said, "excuse me one minute. I want to go and change my boots." He felt it impossible to restrain himself if he stayed there any longer: his muscles quivered with a mad desire to seize the little liar by the throat and choke him. He must cool down; he must calm himself to his habitual cynical indifference, or there would be trouble. The back of his head seemed to be burning—actually and physically aflame. His hand went up there with a sudden mechanical gesture, as though to feel for the cause of this whirling, fiery confusion.

"I shall be back in a minute," he said. Another man—another part of him—seemed to utter the words.

March laughed discordantly. "There's not much to tell," he called after him. "The girl came off in my hands like a ripe plum."

The words struck Sargent as he opened the door to go. He paused a moment, irresolute; then controlled himself, and passed out to his own rooms. He sat down in a chair, and began mechanically to take off his boots. His hand shook, so that he could scarcely control its movements; he was conscious that his forehead was wet with perspiration.

"The damned little swine," he repeated slowly to himself. "The damned little swine! If I had turned back then I should have throttled the life out of him."

Cold rage had him in her grip, and shook him like an ague. For some moments he was incapable of connected

thought : he saw only, as it were, a succession of pictures flashing through his brain. Evelyn sat before him, in church, and he was watching her ; he saw her sweet pale face opposite him across the supper table ; he met her once more in the leafy lane by old Miss Fisher's house ; they were walking back together towards the village. And then came that moment when he had held her in his arms. Since that day—he knew it now, though perhaps he had never known it so fully before—that girl had been his ideal woman. She was present with him always, as the standard by which all others were measured. But for an accident she was his wife. He had the right to defend her fair fame against all manner of creeping, lying vermin. He saw himself, in a vivid flash, choking the lie out of that little drunken fool yonder, and smiled grimly with clenched teeth.

“He has been piling it up for a long time,” he muttered to himself. “And now—he happens to have gone a little too far.”

Yes, he hated him—the mean, noxious, lying, ineffectual little scoundrel. It had been growing gradually within him, this hatred, for weeks, for months. It was the natural antagonism of strength against weakness, of health against disease. At first it had been a sort of contemptuous pity ; now its nature was changed to a fierce enmity. Sargent did not pause to analyse his sentiments, to inquire the reason of the change, or he might have recognised that it lay largely in his own physical deterioration. He was no longer the man he had been two or three years ago. He had been leading an unnatural life—a close, unhealthy, confined life that

was telling upon his nervous system. In a sense he realised this fact, but he failed to attribute to it his excess of fury. He attributed to it merely the effect his rage produced upon himself.

“Two years back I’d have shot him like a dog, and thought nothing of it,” he reflected. “And now I’m all in a stew, and can’t even think properly. Damn it, I *will* think.”

He covered his face with his hands and forced himself into connected thought.

“This is England,” he mused, “England in the twentieth century ; good, sober, law-abiding England, where they hang a man for murder, if they find him out.” He set his teeth. “I don’t know that I mind that much. Thank Heaven I have pluck enough yet to take that risk. It is time the little devil died. Vermin of that sort must be stamped out ; they have no right to exist. And I must kill him—that’s settled.”

He strove to consider the case judicially, impartially, without bias.

“If it had been any one else I might have let it pass. I should, obviously, have let it pass. Yes ! it is bad luck for you, undoubtedly. You might have lied about any other woman in the world, and I wouldn’t have stirred a finger ! Poor little fool ! you don’t know what you’ve done, and you never will know, because you’re just going out like the snuff of a candle. On my soul, I’m half sorry for you. And I have to kill you. I’m half sorry for myself, too.”

“I can’t do it openly, and that’s sad,” he continued. “Yes ! it’s a pity I can’t give the poor little beggar a

show—though I doubt if he'd take it. But this is England, and I'm not going to run any risks. This is going to be suicide, and nothing else."

He sat pondering with bent brows over the way in which it should come to pass. Across the passage he heard March's voice uplifted, calling him by name.

"Sargent ! Come along ! Where the devil have you got to ?" The tone spoke eloquently of whiskey.

"One minute," Sargent called back. Under his breath he muttered, with illogical disgust, "Little devil, he's drunk already."

Drunk ! Well, then, there would be an accident. What could be simpler ? He looked at his watch : it was half-past nine o'clock. The Inn was closed, except for the back entrance ; the rooms below were used as an office, and the tenants left at six. Sargent tied up his shoes, rose, and looked out of the window. The court beneath was empty.

"Fracture of the base of the skull," he meditated. "Falls with his head against the fender. If I'm any judge of skulls, it should go like a sheet of damp paper. And I'm there to see that he falls right."

And yet there was no longer a blazing fire of anger in his brain. It had died down to a red glow. For a moment he hesitated. Was it worth while, after all ? The man was killing himself, by inches ; he would die, and his lies with him. His hand was upon the door ; he might shut himself in, and let the poet drink himself into delirium or slumber as he chose. But just then came the impatient voice once more.

"Come on, curse you!" cried the doomed man. And

Sargent Henderson rose, with a sudden contraction of the eyebrows, stepped across the passage, and went in.

March was flushed and his eyes shone brightly in the gas-light. For it was dusk, and he had lit the lamp dependent from the ceiling above his head. He lay back in his chair and laughed—a drunken laugh that set his hearer's nerves quivering. The dull red glow of passion flamed up suddenly again.

“Stop that noise,” he exclaimed, in a quick gust of anger.

The poet laughed again, for drink made him bold as a lion. “Silly ass! Why should I stop laughing? Laugh yourself. Drink, you sulky devil, drink.” He poured with an unsteady hand, half into the glass, half over the table. His words slid together like a collapsing concertina.

Sargent stood looking at him, filled with contemptuous disgust. He could not bring himself to attack so poor a creature. There was a minute of silence. The poet grew querulous.

“Take those eyes off me,” he called angrily. “Curse you! why are you looking at me like that?”

Sargent smiled grimly. “Get up,” he said. “You don’t look pretty in that chair.”

“Drink!” shouted March again. “You’re jealous—jealous because I have all the luck. Woman, lovely woman.” He rose unsteadily to his feet and advanced, glass in hand. “Here’s to her,” he exclaimed with drunken gravity. “Here’s to the girl I kissed last night—or was it the night before? Drink, confound

you ! To Evelyn—what's her silly name?—Evelyn Sugden ! ”

The words ended with a sudden gasp, for Sargent had him by the throat and was bending him backwards like a reed. March struggled frantically in his grasp, hitting and kicking, but he was powerless in his opponent's hands. Sargent had him on the floor, and brought the back of his head with a crash against the iron fender. But he miscalculated his aim in the heat of the moment, and the victim still struggled, though more faintly. And then Sargent lost his head completely. The weak body in his hands still pulsated, when it should be dead : a wave of unreasoning anger at the obstinacy of the living thing overpowered him, welling up from some hidden depth of savagery. He raised the head and battered it down again and again, with ever-increasing force, until his fury spent itself and the body lay motionless on the floor beneath him, dumb, unresisting, with half-closed eyes showing white in the gas-light.

Theodore March was dead, beyond a doubt ; beyond a doubt, too, the death was not accidental. And with a sudden revulsion of feeling his murderer rose hastily from the poor maltreated corpse, stood for one moment gazing at his handiwork, and then, stricken with a sense of irretrievable disaster, stole quietly from the room and closed the two doors silently upon the silent death within.

CHAPTER XXIX

SARGENT HENDERSON found himself in his own rooms again. His first instinctive act was to pass through into his bedroom and wash his hands. Then, still without any conscious process of reasoning, he opened the window and emptied the basin into the gutter that ran along the parapet. He was conscious only of a wish to get rid of all trace of the deed. He went back to his sitting-room and sat down. A deadly lassitude crept over him ; his hand still shook with the strain of all he had been through. He seemed slowly to swim back into consciousness—to emerge from a black and bewildering fog. He found himself gazing mechanically at his hands, examining them attentively. The first thought that came to him was a feeling of anger at his own stupidity. He swore aloud.

“That is the third time,” he repeated to himself, “the third time I’ve got entirely out of hand. Curse it ! I might have known it would happen. And this is the worst of the lot—it finishes everything. I’m done.”

He meditated gloomily over his misfortunes. For he is a man who had always prided himself, not altogether

without reason, on his powers of self-command. Up to a certain point he was capable of controlling his actions better than most, but there came moments of madness—there had been moments of madness in the past—when he had wrecked everything in some fiery gust of passion just when his schemes were on the point of success. And here it had been the same : some devil had seized him in the moment of victory and wrested from him all its fruits. Why, he had the thing in his hands if he had only kept his head. One tap in the right place and all would have been well—and now ! here was this hideous complication.

The some-time doctor was not naturally a nervous subject. He had as little fear of death as any man, as little dread of the infinite, no shadow of remorse (in the ordinary sense of the word) for what he had done. The man deserved to die, and he had killed him—that was right enough. But he was angry at himself for his own folly, and for the state of nervous tension that had rendered such folly possible ; angry too at the result that he foresaw. He had trapped himself—entangled himself in a net of his own making. Well, he was not going to wait for the consequences. He had no mind to pose as the central figure in a protracted trial. Life had been a barren thing to him at best for the last few years. It was in his power to end it—to follow the poor little fool who lay on the floor a few paces away.

He opened a drawer in his writing-table, took out a Smith and Wesson that lay there, and examined it with careful attention.

“Useful little beggar you are,” he mused. “Helped

me out of a tight place more than once, and you've got to do it again—for the last time. Well, I've often thought it would come to this some day, when I got old and worn out ; it's a bit early, possibly, but what matters a year or so ? I'm tired of the whole show, anyway. On the whole I've made a pretty mess of things, first and last. It's time I went—full time."

After all, perhaps he had not so much to grumble at. He had had a good time in his day. His life passed before him in review—a rather ragged and disorderly regiment, but there was stuff in them. Yes, he had lived, which is more than can be said of most in this quiet and sober world. He had lived and loved, had taken what he wanted when he could get it and gone without when he could not, and feared neither God nor man. He smiled grimly as certain incidents came back to his memory. He was back now to his normal self, or nearly. He thought of March, and frowned.

"I made a mess of it, true enough," he said to himself. "But I'm not sorry. No, I'm glad I killed him ! He ought to thank me too ; he felt nothing—no more than I shall feel myself in an hour or so."

In another few months the poet would have died miserably in his bed ; or, if not months, then in a year or two. Why, he had done the man a kindness, did he but know it. And the blind, stupid law of England would hang him by the neck for it, if it ever caught him. Things were ordered foolishly enough in this country. He loaded his six-shooter with careful deliberation. His hand shook no longer now : it was curious how soon the effect had passed away.

He raised the weapon and examined it critically without a tremor. It pleased him to find that he could regard the future with an equal mind. There would be no fuss about this little business, he felt assured. Why should there be any fuss? What was there to be afraid of? He had seen too many men go out, in all sorts of attitudes, to regard it as anything so very terrible. Several he had helped to retire himself, and they made singularly little difficulty about it when he took them in the right place. Men fear death, he reflected, chiefly because they see so little of it. The process of dying, unduly protracted, is unpleasant enough; but a good, quick, easy death was something to pray for rather than to dread.

"It's easy as falling off a log," he said aloud. "But there's no hurry. Hang it! there's some one coming upstairs."

He listened attentively. His door was open, and he heard the clatter of footsteps distinctly on the wooden stairs. For a moment he paused, irresolute; then he replaced the revolver in his drawer and closed it. He would see the thing through a little longer. He sat back in his chair, waiting. Yes, the man, whoever it was, was coming up to the top floor. Henderson changed his mind suddenly, opened the drawer again, and slipped the six-shooter into his pocket. It might be necessary, for all he knew.

The stranger stopped at the landing, and then knocked loudly at March's door. The sound sent a thrill of unreasoning anger through Henderson's nerves. There was something gruesome in the thought of

clamouring for admittance there. He called out hastily.

“Here, stop that! Come in here. Who is it?”

Sugden came in, pale and somewhat out of breath.

“Oh, it’s you, is it? You can’t get in there; it’s no use trying.”

Sugden was obviously excited.

“I must get in,” he said, in gasps, for he had been running. “Get something and help me break the door open. I know he’s there—the gas is alight—I saw it from the court as I came through.”

“Damn!” said Henderson, taken off his guard for a moment. What a fool he was! He had forgotten all about the light. He recovered himself swiftly. “Well, you can’t get in, man,” he continued. “He’s asleep—dead drunk.”

Jack drew a deep breath of relief. “How do you know? Are you sure?” he asked.

“Of course I know. Put him to bed myself just now. That’s what bothers me—I forgot to turn out the gas before I shut the door.”

“You’re certain of that—absolutely certain? You saw him safe in bed? Excuse me, my dear chap, but I’m rather upset about him. I had a letter from him by the last post.” He brought a crumpled sheet from his pocket. “I came straight down here at once. Of course I knew it might be all rubbish, but one can never be certain. I can tell you it’s a weight off my mind to know he’s all right.” He heaved a sigh.

“He’s quiet enough, if that’s all you’re frightened about,” said Henderson, with grim irony. “You may

bet your boots on it, an earthquake wouldn't rouse him now. What did he say to put you in such a stew?"

Jack flattened the sheet in his hands. "Here it is," he said. "He wrote this early in the afternoon, I suppose. I thought he was with my people at Stourton. I took him down there—to get fit, you know. I heard from them too this evening, saying that March had suddenly disappeared the day before—sent them a wire to say he was called back on business. And then he writes to say he's going to commit suicide, and has left me executor and sole legatee. The man must be mad! Of course, I skipped up here as fast as I could—in case of accidents. I don't know that I really expected anything serious, but I can tell you it gave me a turn at first."

Henderson forced a laugh that sounded rather more cynical than usual. It was like his luck, to hear this now that it was too late. And how admirably this would have fitted in if he had only been able to carry out his scheme properly!

"I don't think he is the stuff of which suicides are made," he said, after a pause. "No, you may rest easy on that score. I'll guarantee him against that particular sort of folly."

"Well, I must say I'm glad you saw him safe to bed," Sugden admitted. "It's a load off my mind, I can tell you. Tell him I'll look him up to-morrow morning, about lunch-time. And look here, there's a good fellow, keep him off the drink if you can. I'm devilish sorry he's broken out again, I can tell you. I thought

he was getting over it." Jack sighed, for his plans had not worked exactly as he had hoped. "I'll be off now," he added. "There's a chap at home waiting to see me, I believe."

Henderson was touched with a momentary regret—a momentary wish to tell him everything. He held out his hand.

"You're a good chap, Sugden," he said, and hesitated. It was in his mind for the moment to send some message, something that Evelyn might remember him by in after years; but his cynical self stepped in, and he turned it off with a laugh. What was the good? He was not an actor making a dramatic death-scene on the stage for the applause of the gods in the gallery. "Shake hands, old man," was all he permitted himself to say. "I'll bear in mind what you say about the poet." And Sugden went clattering down the stairs again.

Henderson drew a deep breath. It was a bit of a strain keeping it up so long.

"I'm not sorry he's gone," he mused. "And so he'll get the money, I suppose. Well, there's some good in it after all. The little man would never have done it himself, not he; he hadn't the pluck!" A thought struck him suddenly. Sugden had been there; it might look bad for him at the inquest if it came out. Hang it! the thing grew complicated. He sat down and knitted his brows in thought.

It crossed his mind that he might write a confession before he shot himself. But no, it was making a lot of fuss—silly theatrical fuss. Every commonplace bank clerk who had embezzled funds wrote a final letter

before shuffling out of the world. There was surely an easier and better way than that.

He thought—and then he smiled. The man smiled, for it was so very simple and so complete. It was also a good test of nerve, and he wished, for the last time, to show his daredevil courage, even if only to himself. He leaned back in his chair and reflected, the ghost of a smile still hovering round his lips. The window of March's room was open, he remembered. He felt in his pocket to assure himself that the revolver was there. Yes, it would do.

He sat there for some time thinking. The Inn clock struck : it was half-past eleven. He rose and poured himself out a drink, went to the door and shut it, and then to the window. He raised the sash and stood looking out into the courtyard.

“Here's for it,” he said, and climbed out upon the parapet.

Outside the windows of the upper floor at Scrivener's Inn runs a wideish gutter, defended by a parapet about a foot in height. It is comparatively easy to walk along it. Workmen, sometimes even the Inn porter, may be seen clambering there on occasions when the pipes get choked with dead leaves in autumn. Upon this Henderson pulled himself, closed the window behind him, and crawled steadily towards the left.

The light shone brightly in March's room, and almost dazzled him as he looked in. He could just see the poet's body on the floor, half hidden by the table, and for a moment his heart beat quickly. He mastered himself with an effort, raised the window gently, and let himself down.

"I'm here, and I'm not going back from it," he muttered savagely, for the strain was more than he had calculated. He felt a superstitious repugnance, an almost unconquerable aversion from that silent body lying there. He forced himself towards it, knelt down and handled it, and recovered himself.

"Superstition is strong in the best of us," he reflected. "And it's time—high time! If I stay here and think I shall end by going back again."

A sort of exaltation came upon him. There was not a man living who would have done this but himself. And soon he would be no more. He addressed the dead body.

"You have your revenge," he said. "And it's a sight more than you deserve." Standing by his side he raised the pistol swiftly to his head and pulled with a sudden jerk. There was a deafening crash, a sound of falling plaster, and the murderer fell across the body of his victim, face upwards, while a thin wreath of smoke eddied slowly towards the window.

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